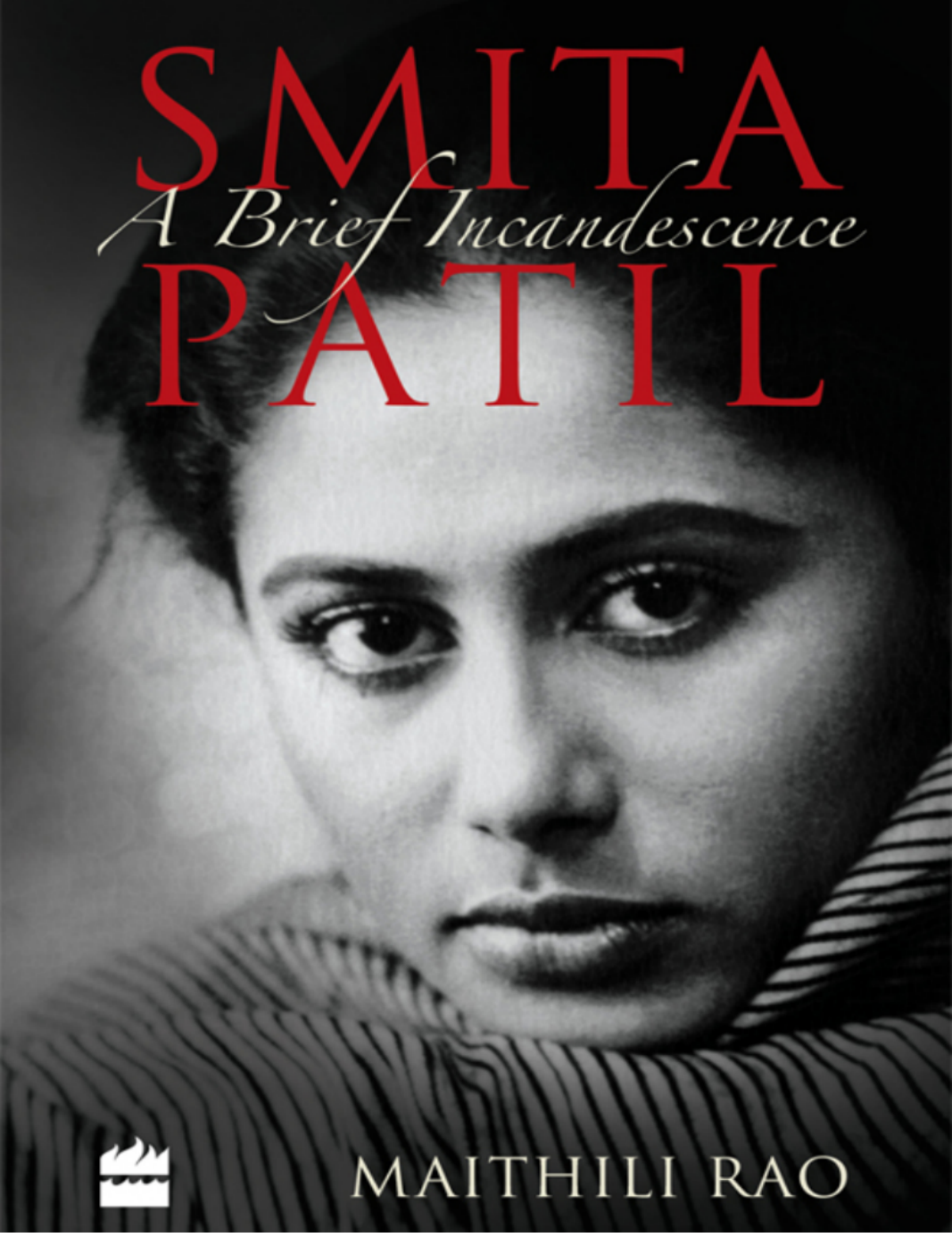
SMITA PATIL

A Brief Incandescence



MAITHILI RAO

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Maithili Rao

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To Raashi and Rohan
for bringing so much joy and love to their Ammama

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Foreword

Smita was the proverbial girl next door. You hardly noticed her. She could easily get lost in a group of young people and become quite simply an anonymous presence.

She was dark complexioned, in a profession that worships fair-skinned women. None of the stereotypical definitions of feminine beauty prevalent in the Indian film industry could define her. It was when she faced the camera that she was transformed into an irresistible magnetic presence that every actor strives hard for, but rarely if ever manages to achieve to the extent she did.

In her short career that spanned all of twelve years, Smita Patil's incredibly riveting and memorable performances in practically all the films she acted in, have remained the envy of most actors in Indian cinema. Anyone who knew Smita as an acquaintance, a friend or a professional colleague remembers her as a guileless, spontaneous young woman given to great enthusiasm.

She had an incredibly wide range of interests, to the extent that her film directors (I speak from experience) would constantly worry that these would come in the way and distract her from the role she was playing in the film she was doing at the time. This never happened because she had that rare ability to switch on and off at will. The moment she stepped in front of the camera lens, she was totally focused. Equally and exasperatingly, she could be completely divorced from the film the moment she moved away from the film set. Smita was not a trained actor. Instinct and intuitiveness played an extremely important part in her performance. Perhaps, this was the single most important reason that made her performances irresistibly attractive and credible.

Maithili Rao's well-researched book is an extremely perceptive introduction to Smita's life and her exceptional work as an actor in Indian cinema.

19 June 2015 Shyam Benegal

Introduction

She was Indian cinema's Everywoman. Her genius shone through in rendering the everywoman extraordinaire with a signature hypnotic allure, a depth charged with intensity that exploded into emotions on celluloid, grand and subtle, dramatic and nuanced all at once. What is the key to unlocking Smita Patil's haunting presence on the silver screen? Is it her finely sculpted face that can be so expressively mobile? Or those wide and deeply set eyes – when they accuse, you feel a twinge of uneasy guilt; when they are mute with agony, you suffer with her. What about that wilful and generous mouth full of passion – love and hate, rage and the promise of husky laughter? A voice vibrating with emotion, seemingly capable of infinite inflections, sometimes surprising you with girlish trills of gaiety. Her silence spoke as eloquently as her full-bodied voice, setting off tremors of complexities. The least flamboyant of gestures and the suggestion of a half-smile expressed a range of meanings. With the proud carriage of a born fighter, valiant as she is vulnerable, Smita created a new grammar of intensity and complexity. She subsumed her self and mannerisms to the demands of the role. Her body had the tensile strength of steel balanced with the suppleness of a reed. These are marvellous assets and a good actor is one who uses these inherent gifts wisely to bring out the familiarity of common experience, and yet portray the particular idiosyncrasies of the screen character.

Smita's face fascinates; she has an earthy Indian look that could belong to any part of India. So many of her brilliant portrayals come to mind: a fiery Gujarati Dalit (*Manthan*), a free-spirited gypsy (*Bhavni Bhavai*), the migrant Bihari peasant who transforms from nurturing earth mother into avenging Kali (*Debshishu*), the vivacious Tamil wife ripe for extramarital amour in lush Kerala highlands (*Chidambaram*), an older widow navigating the crime and grime of a Bombay slum, coping with her young son's drug habit even as she unravels her own love life (*Chakra*), a genteel housewife of Calcutta (a gem of a performance in *Abhinetri*, in the TV series *Satyajit Ray Presents*…), the Deccani Muslim woman who sells a young impoverished bride to an older Gulf-based man to cement her own uncertain status with a lover who will not commit to marriage (*Bazaar*), the uninhibited tribal woman giving her all to the love of her life (*Jait Re Jait*), a Maharashtrian upper-class woman with a conscience, who finally finds her vocation (*Umbartha*), the lonely writer wrenched from her daughter (*Aakhir Kyon*) and the traditional wife caught in marital

misunderstanding (*Bheegi Palkein*). All these roles, albeit not as famous as her work in the more celebrated *Bhumika* and *Tarang*, depict a vibrant inner life apart from the external portrayal, convincing body language and bearing that bring the on-screen character alive.

Mrinal Sen endorses this unique talent to be everywoman. 'Smita's is an eventful story built in an incredibly short span of time, walking from one film to another, growing from strength to strength. Her versatility is a delicious feat, her range beyond easy measure. And true, she always makes herself spectacular by her natural qualities, by remaining *exceptionally ordinary* [the emphasis is mine], by her elegance and poise, and topping it all, by the intensity which surfaces irresistibly from within.' Sen goes on,'India is a country where people speak diverse languages, wear different outfits and where the people are easily identifiable by their different physiognomies. But pull Smita out from anywhere and throw her into any milieu in any part of the country and, surprisingly, she looks deeply rooted in it.'

Of course she made inexplicable choices in her personal life and career, something that confounded and disappointed her fans. That makes her human, not a devi to be put on a pedestal. Vulnerability is essential for a person to experience a range of emotions and even more so for an actor; it enables her to convey the tumult of the screen woman she portrays. Career choices need to be examined in their context and the personal must be respected – especially when she is not here to defend herself.

A veteran journalist, now based abroad, asked me amid the chatter of many simultaneous conversations endemic to a film festival: 'Do you think she deserves a book?' This book is my answer. Smita Patil is a living memory to many of us. Her contribution to Indian cinema, in redefining the Indian woman and interpreting her complexity in memorable films, is immense.

17 October 2014, Nehru Centre auditorium, Worli, Mumbai: Jhelum Paranjape's students from Smitalay, the Odissi school run by this childhood friend of Smita, perform an innovative ballet *Leelavati.* With a cast of over a hundred dancers, the ballet asks and solves mathematical problems using Sanskrit shlokas, with imaginative choreography and inventive storytelling. In the audience are Shivajirao Patil and Dr Anita Patil-Deshmukh, Smita's father and older sister. On the stage is a black-and-white portrait of Smita placed beside a brass diya. After the rousing performance, in an atmosphere

of loving remembrance, Jhelum invites Prateik to the stage.

Overwhelmed by emotion even after all these years, Prateik goes up and sings '*Happy birthday angel*', echoing the emotion that pulses gently through the crowd. Time has blunted the edge of grief but not our mourning; our poignant memories of her excellence linger in the air that envelops us. It is almost palpable, the mesmerizing memory of her, the warmth in our hearts.

Such abiding emotions, such collective memory, are not created in a vacuum. Smita was born in the dawn of our new cinema and grew to maturity in that creatively rich milieu. Destiny brings the right people together at the right time in history. What eminent critic James Monaco wrote of the French New Wave in 1979 is as true of the Indian New Wave:'The metaphor of the "New Wave" was surprisingly apt: the wave had been building up for a long time before it burst on cinematic shores.'*

The 1970s were a time when the calcified mould of mainstream cinema began to break up, and amidst its splinters, shoots of vibrant, personal perceptions of film aesthetics struggled to find audience acceptance. All through the post- Emergency years when the Angry Young Man ruled the screen, there was a sense of fatigue with the formula building up. There was slickness of narrative and smart technology-aided gloss, but the themes were confined within narrow limits. Melodrama and romance, vengeance and violence were the bricks that built the box office pyramid. The reality of Indian life, its endless struggles, challenges and frustrations, little joys and great sorrows, the sheer variety of a multi-cultural pluralistic society were not being portrayed, neither by mainstream Mughals nor by slavish followers of a successful new formula.

Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen had shown that a different kind of cinema was possible. A cinema of personal vision that came from deep within a cultivated sensibility and educated intellect. One that was alive to the ferment at home and yet open to the winds of change wafting in from the world outside. Bengal acted like a beacon – as it had so many times in the past – to film-makers in other regions who forged a cinema that was rooted in their ethnicity and culture. It was a reassertion of the authentically local against the conformism demanded by mainstream cinema, not just Hindi but its regional counterparts too.

Auteurs of the new cinema flourished when the government

stepped in – the Film Finance Corporation offered funding to a host of film-makers – many were often anti-establishment, a few espoused avant-garde experimentation, most were neo- realists who wanted to tell the truth without the embellishment of song and dance that is so inherent to our narrative traditions, and a minority of adherents pursued purist non-linear cinema. Wavelets of change were acting cumulatively to build up the surge that changed our cinema in the 1970s, through to the 1980s, until it petered out as any unstructured movement does in the course of time. New Cinema as a movement ran out of steam. Auteurs remained, ploughing their lonely way with admirable conviction even though they could not build up an alternate distribution system. Only the film festival circuit and Doordarshan were available. It is interesting to speculate whether parallel cinema could have thrived if multiplexes had arrived in the 1980s and catered to what was always a niche audience.

At its zenith, parallel cinema – the consensual term for what was variously described as art or the *other* cinema – minted new stars along with star auteurs. The climate was just right for the arrival, almost en masse, of gifted actors like Smita Patil, Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Deepti Naval and a host of talent trained at the National School of Drama (NSD) and the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. The iconic quartet of Smita, Shabana, Naseer and Om (the familiarity of affection dispensing with surnames persists to this day) ruled Hindi cinema's parallel world. It was a felicitous combination of the right time and climate for a different kind of film-making by directors looking for new faces to break the stereotype of the film heroine – a long-suffering Sati Savitri or the frilled, flouncy and bouncy modern miss of romance. It was time for a new film sensibility and 'real' faces. These new actors made forays into other languages too, and this gave a cachet to regional films.

This new credo of film-making that stressed on the truthfulness of reality demanded fresh faces to make their stories authentic and rooted. Women came into their own in this conducive climate. Film-makers like Shyam Benegal often made women the central character, as a metaphor for societal and sexual oppression while they were depicted as strongly etched individuals. And thus were born landmark films like *Ankur, Nishant, Manthan, Bhumika, Mandi, Jait Re Jait, Chakra, Umbartha, Tarang, Bazaar*, to name the most prominent. The Smita–Shabana success story spilled over into mainstream cinema as well. So followed *Arth, Aakhir Kyon, Amrit*, where the woman took centre stage even in the company of a superstar like Rajesh Khanna. Smita figures in almost all seminal films of that period. The change that Smita and Shabana wrought is nothing less than revolutionary because the ruling female stars of that time were Rekha, Hema Malini

and Jaya Bhaduri who had voluntarily retreated into domesticity. Formulaic cinema of the 1970s and 1980s was unwilling to place a woman at the heart of the story. She was a decorative appendage, a victim to be avenged by a male hero, or the lachrymose mother making enormous sacrifices for the laadla beta. It was not always so in Indian cinema, as the best of the 1950s and 1960s show.

Mainstream cinema works on the association of images with mythologies old and new. In fact, it is the magic of cinema that mints mythologies for our times, dredging memories of historic archetypes and imbuing them with new, accessible meanings. Archetypes dwindle into stereotypes, for easy, undemanding consumption through overuse.

The distinguishing quality of parallel cinema is that it is more personal – in the director's vision, in the actors' ability to relate to us at a realistic level of emotional resonance and amplified context. Here too, new mythologies are being forged in the flux of change. It challenges a society living simultaneously in centuries, in their mind-sets and perceptions. So you have an archetype that is not a historical memory, honed or attenuated over time, but one that has immediate connect and resonance. More than any of her immensely talented colleagues who enriched this new cinema, Smita became a symbol of this new, living archetype. This translates into images through which cinema leaves its imprint. Smita's Sonbai, crouching against the background of red chillies, or pouring water from a brass pot into the cupped hands of a kneeling, luxuriantly moustachioed Naseer in *Mirch Masala*, is a new archetypal image of the earth woman who leads a rebellion against injustice. It is a counterpart to the hallowed silhouette of Nargis stoically carrying the plough on her shoulders in *Mother India*. It wasn't just about Smita's enormous fund of natural talent. There was this raw urgency in her, an urgency that leaped out of the frame and grabbed you. Thankfully, the time was ripe for its efflorescence in the nurturing milieu of parallel cinema.

The artistic success of this cinema facilitated the entry of these actor–stars into the mainstream, much before the directors found wider acceptance. Smita broke the barrier between art and commerce almost at the outset in her glittering career – acting with Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri as well as megastar Amitabh Bachchan and the ex-phenomenon Rajesh Khanna. It is gratifying that accolades came to her so early in life – she was only twenty-two when she got the National Award for Best Actress for *Bhumika*. This seems to have had an extraordinarily liberating effect on her. Her commitment to serious cinema, to organizations that worked for women and liberal values grew strong, even as she succumbed to the lures and blandishments of mainstream cinema. It is a paradox that many find difficult to

understand or even sympathize with. Raj Babbar's influence notwithstanding, Smita had the same hunger for wider communication that many actors have felt before and continue to feel. Rewards for artistic excellence were assured. The need to communicate with a mass audience, not just the adulatory closed circle of festival habitués, resulted in good, bad and indifferent films. But even here, she continued to experiment and chose roles most glamorous actresses would not touch with a ten-foot bargepole.

It is natural that Smita's life and career are inextricably bound together. It is a fascinating journey of rediscovery to go back to her films, to be seared by her intensity, marvel at her astonishing maturity, and to be moved by the poignancy she bequeathed us in a span of barely eleven years.

What is amazing is how in the brief incandescent life given to her, Smita shone so bright and steady. She was indubitably the pole star of parallel cinema. She also left an indelible mark in some of the mainstream films she chose to do. An astonishingly substantial body of work – over seventy films in a little over a decade – that needs to be celebrated. And critically examined from the hindsight of posterity.

This book then is not a conventional biography. Nor a collection of anecdotes. It charts her life in cinema and examines her significant films in their context and from the perspective of distance that time has given us.

As for her personal life and controversial marriage to an already married Raj Babbar, I have consciously decided not to delve into it for a variety of reasons. Years ago, when the germ of this book was conceived, I had met Smita's mother who was open, generous and surprisingly forthcoming. I made repeated attempts to get in touch with Raj Babbar but without success. Thick in the process of writing this book, I once again tried to contact him through his daughter Juhi. An impasse, yet again. It was time to decide that I would neither use confidences shared by Smita's friends, nor give credence to second-hand gossip and lurid speculation that are so freely available even today. Smita is not here to give her version of what happened and why. Hence, mention of her involvement with Raj Babbar, if any, is in the context of the larger point being made.

Time heals the most bitter controversies and ugly rancours. Things have the habit of returning to an even, civilized keel. Vidyatai Patil died on 7 March 2015. At the condolence meeting held at Rock Cliff,

the sea-facing Bandra building where Smita's parents live (Prateik moved out a couple of years ago), a grave- faced Raj Babbar was very much present and was later joined by Nadira Babbar, Juhi and her husband, the well-known TV actor Anup Soni. They were there to offer solace to Prateik, Anita and Shivajirao Patil. Another chapter comes to a close.

New Wave, OUP, New York, p.11.

1

Anchored to Her Puneri Roots

It is only the truly local that can be truly universal. So goes the adage to validate the unvarnished reality of art cinema. Only the truly rooted actor can grow into the versatility demanded of a performer who must often be a chameleon. Rootedness negates the cultural deracination that sometimes follows an actor's journey in essaying so many roles, getting under so many skins. Being aware of her roots gave an actor like Smita Patil intuitive strength to blossom with such passionate spontaneity that you cannot quite imagine any other actor in the role she played. She owned the role. You cannot say this of many actors. Art was inborn, the craft she learnt. Together, art and craft melded into the magic of Smitaness.

How does one trace this journey, this phenomenon of being Smita?

Life is not a series of easy transitions. From happy childhood through the usual turbulence of adolescence to the confident maturity of adulthood. Most people have decades at their disposal to reach the assurance of adulthood and grow along with the years, garnering experience to smoothen the passage of life. In hindsight, it seems as if Smita's all-too-brief journey was a compression of varied experiences, a telescoping of events that seeped into her sensibility. The Smita we remember is an astonishingly well-rounded person with so many dimensions to discover. And cherish. Strong and sensitive,

independent and vulnerable, confident and insecure, she had an innate courage to live with contradictions even as she tried to reconcile them. Branded in memory is her searing sincerity and lust for living life to its limits. A childlike trust and curiosity, thoughtful and at the same time playful, as if the child in her lingered into adulthood. Yet, underneath it all was an endearing simplicity, the rootedness of a supple sapling that could bend and sway with every passing breeze but not break. The legacy of her work leaves its mark on our minds, finds us grappling, as if in the dark, to capture the essence of her being. This core essence one can trace back to her childhood and a remarkable family.

It is not surprising that Smita was born in a city that was a bastion of Maratha power and custodian of Maharashtrian culture at its authentic, representative best. This culture's outstanding qualities are those that endure: intellectual rigour, robust rationality that kept alive a reformist tradition, an almost puritanical restraint and lack of ostentation. Here, the grace of cultivated austerity was the perfect match for sturdy pragmatism. Smita's parents, Vidya and Shivajirao Patil, are heirs to these essential virtues.

Pune of the 1940s and 1950s was not the wannabe clone of Bombay and Bangalore that it has morphed into today. Bombay had not yet spread its omnivorous tentacles so far out into the hinterland – physically and culturally – as to swallow a proud Peshwa outpost, and in the process, diminish it to a distant suburb infected with its own chaos. Pune is the Spartan city of reformers, educationists, nationalists, and in a strange way, it is the Indian counterpart of the puritan work ethic that built the new nation of America. Smita's parents symbolize this work ethic and its reformist ethos. As the middle child among three sisters, Smita absorbed the lessons of hardship and self-reliance, the need for family support and a contrarian streak of independence.

Life was hard for Vidya and Shivajirao who made Pune their home after an unconventional marriage. Their struggle makes for a fascinating story that had a deep impact on their children. They are similar in essence – of shared values – but very much their own person. The way they remember and recall their life, of themselves as parents and the small details of family life after all these years, says a lot about Vidyatai and Shivarjirao as two strong individuals.

Regret and unspoken guilt lace Vidyatai's firm tone as she receives yet another enquiring journalist in pursuit of her famous daughter. (The first encounter took place more than ten years ago. At the time of writing, she was too ill to receive visitors.) She is formidable, forthright and sure of her fundamentals. There is sincere warmth that lights up the steady voice of a small, bustling woman with steel in her

backbone and principled idealism in her heart. Vidyatai has tremendous empathy for working mothers and the cruel choice they have to make between spending time with children and the compulsion to go out and earn their livelihood. She has gone through it all, when Anita (the oldest), Smita and Manya were young children. The unvoiced guilt surfaces in the eagerness with which she talks of Smita's innate nurturing nature. Is there an element of idealizing the lost child who died after giving birth to her own child in the lingering penumbra of her mother's disapproval? The occasional vulnerability that peeps through the brisk, frank tone is touching.

Shivajirao is an impressive figure – tall, dark and upright – who speaks with the deliberation of a seasoned statesman. The clarity with which he recollects a long life in public service is reassuringly rational. He talks of early struggles and achievements with a calm restraint, unlike Vidyatai's ebullient, often emotional reminiscences of what is an old, familiar story.

Smita received the Padma Shri in 1986 when she was thirty- one. Her father Shivajirao received the Padma Bhushan after seventy years in public life. His equanimity is unruffled in tacitly acknowledging that most people know him as Smita's father. This pride in his children is not new. Anita recalls her father telling her of a public felicitation of Smita at Chowpatty after she won her first National Award. 'All these days, she was known as my daughter. Today, I am proud to be known as Smi's father.' He goes on to add, 'I never missed having a son. My daughters are better than most sons.' He has plenty of reason to happily wear his pride.

Shivajirao is a man of few words who exudes calmness and strength, with an easy-going tolerance that lets people just be. His progressive ideas were shaped by active participation in student politics at the grass-root level. He was elected general secretary of the All India Students Federation of Jalgaon and Dhulia districts in 1939 when he was barely seventeen. Shivajirao was a freedom fighter first and foremost. Jailed at fifteen, he ran away from Dhulia jail. He was shackled in a dark cell during the Independence movement. Sane Guruji and his elder brother Dr Uttamrao Patil were major influences that shaped his progressive thinking. His landowner father was disappointed by the son's giving up of formal education but never stopped him from passionate involvement in the freedom struggle. The ironies of life never cease. Shivajirao remembers that his grandfather wanted him to be a police officer and here was the freedom fighter, a repeat offender, ending up in jail! Shivajirao was a committed worker of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), the socialist wing that broke off from the Congress in 1947. This cost him the support of a family that was staunchly pro-Congress over generations. He

rejoined the Congress in 1964 and served as the state general secretary, then got elected to the legislative council, and later served as the state's Cabinet minister for irrigation, power and legislative affairs.

The rewards for committed political work came late but this did not change the basic adherence to simplicity. The early years were dauntingly difficult. They were also limned with romance of the radical kind, so redolent of the heady air of idealism of those days. Vidya was engaged to another man of her family's choice when she first heard Shivajirao's stirring speech in Shirpur town (Khandesh district). She was emboldened to write him a note, expressing her desire to work with him. Their marriage was blessed by Sane Guruji. It took them through a tough but shared journey of party work. Even now, it is easy to detect a note of youthful adventure in Vidyatai's voice as she talks of the days spent in Bombay, where the young couple lived in a huge hall hired by labour leader Ashok Mehta for party workers and textile trade unionists. She was the only woman in that commune.

Time for an aside that delights journalists seeking parallels in the life of two parallel cinema icons and rivals. Similarities in the parental lives of both Smita and Shabana Azmi are uncanny. Shabana remembers the communal life she and her parents shared in a huge hall in central Bombay with leftist friends and ideologues. She recalls how she was a drama queen even in those early days while Smita seemed to have reserved her theatrics for adolescence. Shabana has often spoken of how Javed Akhtar sees the similarities in their lives. 'You could have been sisters,' is his succinct summation. It is ironical that two extraordinary women who defined the image of the new Indian woman were caught in the cycle of rivalry that never allowed them to be friends.

The Patils' life in Bombay was a peripatetic one. Grief came early. Vidyatai lost her first child, a boy, in infancy. After the stint in Bombay, the Patils came back to Pune even though her father-in-law asked Vidyatai to stay back in Khandesh while Shivajirao went about his party work. The family that originally came from Rajasthan and were Sisodias ended up owning land in Dhulia district. They are as Maharashtrian as varan bhat, the Puneri pagdi and nine-yard kashta sari can be. Anita asserts that many of her cousins still use Sisodia as their surname.

Despite the father-in-law's diktat, Vidyatai and Shivajirao just could not stay apart. Till Anita, the first child, was born, they lived with friends who were all party members. Shivajirao's monthly salary (it was paid intermittently) was a princely thirty rupees that rose steeply to seventy-five some time later. Vidyatai tells of her life as a

harried homemaker, coping with a young daughter, working at the Corporation and keeping an open house where party workers dropped in anytime.

It was Vidyatai, the stern matriarch of the family, who brought up the girls when her husband was busy with his political work that took him away from home for long periods. Shivajirao acknowledges that he was away from the everyday life of the family but that did not come in the way of closeness with the girls. He insists, 'Though I was immersed in my work and was not available for the daily routine of family duties, I was still very close to my daughters as anyone could be. I was conscious of my responsibility and did my best to be with them.' Some tough decisions and hard choices had to be made, for practical reasons.

A doctor-friend advised Vidyatai to give up party work and train as a nurse to supplement the family income. She had dreamed of being a doctor but nursing came close enough. This meant she lived in the hostel for three years, while Shivajirao and Anita lived in a room of the PSP office. The first child in a family is often pampered and showered with attention. Anita was inducted into independence very young because of the unusual circumstances of working parents with unpredictable schedules. The parents recall an incident when Shivajirao was away for three days. Each assumed the other was taking care of Anita. They panicked when they could not find her. Finally, they had to thank the neighbourhood istriwala who found the little girl playing alone and took her home with him. Vidyatai has not let her husband forget this parental lapse and he still remembers the scolding of his life! Anita laughs off the incident. 'I felt very secure in my father's love. I was a very obedient child,' claims this elegant neonatologist who trained and worked in the US for years. She has now come back to help set up an NGO, Pukar.

If Anita was pushed into independence from childhood, Smita was just the opposite as a young girl. Smita was born in 1955 (17 October) when Vidyatai was finishing her nursing course. Vidyatai cycled to her hospital when six months' pregnant, in order to be on time, until one of the doctors scolded her. Smita's birth was nothing short of dramatic, avoidably traumatic for the hard-pressed mother. In the morning, rushing through her chores, Vidyatai slipped while cleaning and her waters broke. Even so, soaking and weak, she went to report for duty because she didn't want to lose a working day. To add to her problems, Vidyatai had not even registered for delivery at any hospital or clinic. Reprimanded by colleagues at the municipal clinic, she got into a rickshaw in the afternoon and asked the man to stop at Saraswati Lakshmi Maternity Home which she vaguely remembered passing by on the way. Luckily, the doctor there turned out to be

someone under whom she had trained as a nurse. And Smita was born at around 5 p.m., three weeks early – a dark, underweight baby. She was named Smita because she was such a smiling baby.

Vidyatai was finally able to get quarters in the hospital where she worked and life eased somewhat. Only a little though, because it was a wrench for both the mother and the new baby who cried inconsolably when she had to be weaned. You can hear the pain in Vidyatai's mellow voice after all these years. Women need to work but how she wishes they could take time off when the children are little. Vidyatai's regret is evident as she talks of those days when tough love was something that needed to be practised every day. It was not just a catch phrase bandied about by the tabloid brand of popular psychology.

Whether it was the middle-child syndrome or her innate craving for physical closeness, Smita was the most clingy of the three sisters. She knew Maa would be away when she saw her in uniform and clung to her knees, to delay the inevitable departure. Before her third daughter Manya was born, Vidyatai wanted to enrol Smita in a kindergarten class run by a woman she knew. A sobbing Smita clutched her mother and stuttered, 'May both your clinic and my school fall down!' But for Vidyatai, duty was the first priority. Sometimes, Smita accompanied her mother to the municipal hospital where she worked. A slum woman had given birth to her third baby, a girl. And as usual, the family ignored a woman who had yet another daughter. Vidyatai made tea for her and Smita, all of four, declared that she would take tea for the woman every day.

Compassion came easily. But as her father recalls, she was also very stubborn and insisted on getting what she wanted. It was a largely vegetarian home and Smita was always a vegetarian, the Maharashtrian staple of varan bhat being her favourite. Shivajirao fondly remembers that Smi would insist on ghee with her dal and rice.'Where is tuup?' she would plaintively ask, going round the dining table in the three-room quarters allotted to her mother. 'All we had was a little home-made ghee. We couldn't afford to buy it.' At two and a half, little Smi wanted her tuup or she would not eat.

Right from childhood, Smita was the emotional one while the other two children were more practical. Vidyatai's adjective to describe the daughter with whom she had the most conflicted relationship is '*prem mayee*', a being suffused with love. The young Smita had this intense need to love and be loved. Playing mother came naturally to her and the need to nurture was a driving force in her life.

Manya was a sturdy little girl, three years younger than Smita. Their mother was always in a hurry, to finish chores, tend to the

children and rush to work. One time, as she was setting off, Vidyatai finished bathing the youngest, and told six- year-old Smita to wipe Manya dry and help her dress. Manya pushed Smita hard and the delicately built Smita fell with a thud. With not a trace of irritation or admonition for the naughty little sister, Smita murmured endearments in a loving voice, and unhurriedly finished the task entrusted to her.

The young Smita was easily moved to tears. At seven, she once found a dead sparrow. She lovingly made a bed of cotton wool, mourned over it and buried the sparrow with grave solemnity. She would pick up all the stray dogs, clean and feed them biscuits dipped in tea, under the water tower near the house. Smita needed space, and more and more people to nurture. Anita remembers Smi (that is what the sisters always called her) wanting to live in a wada (a sprawling many-roomed traditional house where extended families live) and have eight to ten children! This craving for motherhood was intense, like a force of nature that she lived by at an unconscious level. Her maternal first cousin Sanjeevani, who knows more about all the naughty things an adolescent Smita did, recalls the shimmering glow in Smita's eyes as she watched a pup suckling at the mother's teat.

The home environment had its contrary pulls and pushes. Vidyatai was a stickler for rules. She had an eagle eye for neatness and everything had to be in its place. If she was lying down in bed, she would look up at the fan and ask, 'Why is there so much dirt on it!' Smita, the non-conformist free spirit, had her own struggles with Maa. Her relationship was far more easy- going with her father, the strong, understanding parent who was basically non-judgemental.

As the middle child, Smita had perhaps more leeway to 'find' herself. The Patil family made decisions after a lot of discussion where the girls voiced their opinions freely. It was an automatic choice that Anita and Smita were enrolled in a Marathi-medium school – Bhave Girls School, now Renuka Devi School, named after a donor. Anita remembers the eagerness and enthusiasm with which Smi took part in their school's extracurricular activities. 'She desperately wanted to act in the school play but our principal Mrs Kamala Rajhans did not select her. Smi complained,"*Bai mala nahi ghetla natakala*."' She was so unhappy! Smita was not all solemnity though. Anita, her first cousin Sanjeevani and Jhelum Paranjape (the noted Odissi dancer was a childhood friend) all speak of the wonderful mimic Smita was. The actor was waiting in the wings, feathers furled, unaware of her own potential.

From a sickly child, she turned more athletic and revelled in mischief. Anita, six years older, remembering her own obedient nature, marvels at how adventurous Smi was even as a young girl. 'She was boisterous, on the ground, revelling in getting dirty. She was

a spirited girl [who grew into a spirited woman] from the time she was born. She was basically adventurous in spirit.' She was adept at inventing games and entered all kinds of races. Smita was fiercely competitive when it came to athletics– 'I must win the medal' was her mantra. A bemused Anita ruminates on how this competitiveness was absent when it came to her film career. Unlike her sisters and most girls of her age, Smita was not ambitious as a child and had no set goals. Something would suddenly catch her interest and she would work hard to accomplish it, however trivial it might seem in hindsight. Anita fondly goes into detail about feisty Smi's school girl ambition to win an election! Her father's political genes showing through fleetingly, perhaps…

'In our school, we had mandals – groups of girls from every standard from fifth to eleventh. They were divided into seven or eight groups, named after seasons, Hemant, Varsha, etc. They had to have kula prabhus, and the kula prabhus would elect the mandal prabhu. Smi was in the fifth standard and decided she wanted to be a mandal prabhu. It was a huge ground and I remember Smi going around holding placards with a couple of her friends, asking the girls to vote for her. She campaigned a lot for that election. It's surprising that all that I saw in school, that competitiveness, I never saw her like that in films.

'There she was, going round and round, then somebody asked her: *Caste kya hai*? We didn't know. This word caste was never used at home. She came home and asked aloud: What's our caste? Maa replied that we are Maharashtrian. Smi went right back and declared: My caste is Maharashtrian. They laughed and laughed. Her face fell and she came back and told Maa: This is not our caste! Maa said: Tell them we are Harijans. So she went and told them that. And she won!'

Manya had it easier as a child. Shivajirao decided that it was time at least one of the girls, the youngest in this case, had an English education in a convent. There was a lot of debate, and after convincing Vidyatai, Manya (her real name is Gita) was enrolled in one of Pune's oldest, highly reputed schools, St Mary's. Shivajirao cites this to show how involved he was in his daughters' education, all-round development, physically and intellectually. He encouraged them 'to talk of anything and everything freely'.

It so happened that Manya failed her class. The teachers at St Mary's advised that she would perform better if she could be a boarder in their branch at Mussoorie where admission was available for one student. That entailed more discussion at home and, finally, Manya went to Mussoorie. Shivajirao made sure that the entire family visited the youngest child two or three times a year. Manya has flowered into an urbane sophisticate who has lived in New York

independently and now jet sets between Delhi and Bombay.

School life in Pune was packed with activities for the two older girls. The conscientious, politically aware parents encouraged Anita and Smita to join the Rashtra Seva Dal (RSD), a cultural organization that remained outside politics but was interested in moulding young minds to the idea of service. Shivajirao credits S.M. Joshi as one of the founders of RSD under the guidance and inspiration of Sane Guruji. In the 1940s, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was going about assiduously developing shakhas, and their main slogan was to catch them young to turn youngsters into ideologically driven swayamsevaks. Starting with physical education, the RSS regimen followed it up with sermons on Hindutva. Joshi was aware that something had to be done to counter this dangerous ideology that brainwashed children into forming a narrow, exclusivist Hindutva idea of society. There was the Congress Seva Dal of course but they did not train young people ideologically. Joshi decided to counter the RSS shakhas with Rashtra Seva Dal, following the same principle, catch them young. '*Sarva dharma samanata*, Gandhiji's cardinal philosophy, was the main principle of Rashtra Seva Dal. There was no talk of secularism as such but the stress was on the equality of all faiths,' is how Shivajirao encapsulates the RSD credo.

The boys and girls of RSD went to camps during festival holidays – Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali, Christmas and summer – to learn singing, dancing or performing plays. Anita and Smita were enthusiastic members who went on Bharat Darshan and Maharashtra Darshan tours, performing in remote villages to entertain, educate and serve the marginalized. Vasant Bapat, a well-known poet and author, was a tremendous influence those days. It was social and cultural grounding, fortified with mother's milk – Vidyatai too was a Seva Dal Sainik. So the idea of egalitarianism and social justice, of the equality of all faiths and religions was inbred. Consciously and subconsciously, her years with RSD were a hugely formative factor in shaping Smita's character and personality. It is a given that performing on stage from childhood freed the future actor from stage fright and inculcated the ability to take direction.

Unsurprisingly, her favourite play was the perennial success of Marathi theatre, *Durga Zali Gauri*, that used song and dance to convey a simple, uplifting message. Madhav Sakhardande wrote this musical fable for children, inspired by the work of Baba Amte. It tells the story of Durga, a spoiled, adolescent princess who learns to appreciate the true value of hard work when a simple peasant couple raise her after she has been banished by her exasperated parents.

The nurture of socially committed parents combined with the ethical grounding of her RSD years gave Smita her trademark traits of

simplicity, openness and generosity when she entered films. She was as friendly with the unit hands as with fellow actors. Everyone who has worked with her vouches for this quality of hers with admiration.

Years later, this easy camaraderie with her RSD friends caused acute embarrassment to the recipient of Smita's unaffected friendliness. She was a big star by then when she came across Ashok, one of her RSD camp mates, now a junior make-up artist living in a Juhu slum. Jhelum Paranjape recalls: 'Smi was her usual friendly self, hugging him warmly like a long-lost friend. The poor boy faced harassment on the sets, the butt of taunts like "*Saala tu chamcha banna chahta hai*?" He was so embarrassed that he went to Maa and asked her to dissuade Smi from being so openly friendly.' It was not just about a difference of hierarchy prevalent in the industry. Even in RSD, there was an imperceptible class difference – girls came from middle-class families, boys were from the lower-middle or working class.

Many such insights come from Jhelum, wiry, vivacious and vibrantly frank. Jhelum runs Smitalaya, the dance school where Odissi is reinvented to experiment with newer themes, including interpreting Bollywood golden oldies through this most sensuous of our classical dance forms. Perhaps one of the most important outcomes of the RSD experience was the beginning of their deep friendship. Smita was a year younger, when they first met around 1966. Jhelum came from a similar background. Her father was Prof. Sadanand Varde, a lifelong member of the PSP. Jhelum speaks with the perspicacious intimacy of lifelong friendship. 'Smita was often moody and demanding. She demanded attention and was often theatrical, given to being dramatic.' When they went on tours, they had to camp and make their own beds. When she liked to, Smita complied with the rules. Jhelum chuckles,'When she didn't want to, she would sit in a corner and gaze at the moon with a sulking, sad-eyed expression. She'd complain: all of you have brothers. I don't.' Her friends bought into this untenable argument, humoured her and did her share of the work.'The playacting was fun, even if predictable, but she was very lovable,' Smita's dear friend of many years says, in a tone of affection tinged with admiration. 'Smi had no inhibitions whatsoever and did what she wanted, not bothered about what others thought.'

She cheekily imitated the great Kelucharan Mahapatra (the doyen of Odissi and Jhelum's guru) and the chagrined shishya had to concede how good the take-off was. 'If Smi was occasionally moody, she was also outgoing, wanting to make friends. She clammed up if others did not reciprocate,' reveals the devoted friend.

The girls' activities did not stop with RSD alone; the Patils encouraged them to pursue other interests as well.

Smita was naturally drawn to the arts, as were her sisters. It was

Vidyatai, ever practical and ambitious for her children, who encouraged Anita to take up medicine. Anita confesses that her dream was to enter the IAS and become a collector. But she was convinced that medicine could be a good alternative.'Finally, the ultimate purpose is to serve people,' she says with quiet pride. Shivajirao was aware that Anita was interested in learning the sitar but that did not quite fit into the family budget. He gave up cigarettes so that Anita could get her sitar lessons. For both Anita and Smita, their father was their hero.

Smita escaped the intense attention that is normally reserved for the first-born and was freer to do what she wanted. Anita, the most perceptive of sisters, recognized the complexity under her sister's seeming conformity. She says with disarming honesty: 'It was not easy being our mother's daughters. Maa's head ruled her, Smi was ruled by her heart.' A tougher taskmaster, convinced of the rightness of what she is doing, is difficult to find. All the girls, Smita more acutely so, needed their mother's approval that was so hard to win.

An incident, told quite often, is testimony to Vidyatai's tough love approach. It bears retelling. Smita was around eleven, and returning home late at night from Bhave School after a school function. She had to cross Shanker Seth Road which was very lonely at this time of night. Her mother waited one mile away, behind the bus stop. Vidyatai allowed Smita to pass her and then called out to her daughter. Smita threw her cycle down, ran to her mother and the two hugged each other tightly. Vidyatai's intention was to teach a young girl a crucial lesson in self- confidence. To sum up in her words, '*Do dene ka, do lene ka'*. In her rule book, it meant: Be prepared to take all decisions and face them, we are with you though we will not interfere in your life. Portentous words that brought in their wake so much heartache in their lives – Smita desperate for her mother's approval and support, and Vidyatai holding back, unable to forgive Smita for her marriage to Raj Babbar.

But all that came later. Along with the hard lessons came a lot of fun and games. And the joy of learning the arts. Smita's training in music is not much known. She had lessons from Mogubai Kurdikar for a couple of months. Jal K. Balporia of the Gwalior gharana came home to teach her. All the dance that Smita learnt was courtesy her RSD training. Jhelum's own trained eye saw how very graceful Smita was, once she had outgrown her sickly childhood. Smita's friend, Hitendra Ghosh (it was he who introduced her to Arun Khopkar, her first director) recalls how he would often find Jhelum teaching Smita, how the two friends enjoyed dancing together. Her athleticism complemented the languor that suffuses Odissi and lends graceful curves to the linear mudras of Bharatnatyam.

There was also the serious side to Smita. She was very helpful even as a young girl. If someone went to her for help, she would go out of her way to do whatever was possible. And sometimes, even beyond. She did not count costs, recalls Anita. 'The analytical mind was not hers. She lived by instinct.' As a child and an adult, even later, when she was a star, she had this instinctual need for expression. It found a creative outlet in childhood as well as later years. Smita's letters to her US-based nephew (Anita's son Adeet) were more drawings than words.

The really fun side of Smita's childhood is revealed by Sanjeevani's fond recollections. Though Smita was good at studies, she was more interested in 'masti and gaali galot with the boys'. '*Ye halkat*!' she would call out, riding her cycle. Sanjeevani tells how Smita learnt driving (clandestinely) while still very young. Anita remembers Smita, barely fourteen, driving a lumbering Ambassador in the Naidu Hospital Complex. Some huge pipes were stacked and Smita dashed against one such pipe. Shocked, she started crying.

Sanjeevani also remembers the many fights they had, fights, big and small, as all cousins do. After a fight, Smita would refuse to sit next to Sanjeevani in the school bus. She would then quickly write a small note. Silence with people close to her was something she could not bear. The cousin recalls how Smita fought to get picked for plays and invariably played Jijabai. She also directed plays at the old Sachivalaya whenever she was in Bombay. Sanjeevani relishes some really naughty pranks they played then. Smita was the leader of the gang. They would stand lining the balcony and spit down at people walking on the ground floor. They would ring up honeymooning couples in the guest house, change their voice, knock on doors and vanish. The group had their own variation of gender wars: Rana Pratap (male cousins) vs Jhansi ki Rani (Smita and Co). They fought mock battles lasting four to five hours, wielding dried gulmohur branches for swords.

As a child, the icon of deglamourized art cinema was fastidious about her clothes. Students of Marathi-medium schools did not have to follow the rigorous discipline demanded by English-medium schools when it came to uniforms. Other kids wore un-ironed clothes but not Smita. She pressed every pleat of her uniform to perfection. She was rather vain about her toned legs. Sanjeevani remembers being awed by the fact that Smita owned the first pair of hotpants in their group. She had two pairs – one green and one pink – in which she strutted around, her athletic, muscled legs on display. As for dancing skills, she braved her mother's wrath one Ganapati festival to dance to a Bollywood song. Smita was more decorous when it came to music. She played the flute in the school band.

Smita was an avid reader from her early teens. One of her favourite books was the Marathi novel *Mrityunjaya* and she idolized Karna, its hero. Anita says that though they were from Marathi medium, Smita graduated to reading books in English and built up an impressive collection. She was often immersed in a book on the sets while shooting.

By the time she reached her teens, Smita was intensely aware of the minefield of male–female sexual attraction. She tightly held Sanjeevani's hand and scared her out of her wits with the declaration, I want to be a mother. Those words haunted Sanjeevani when she met a pregnant Smita – alone, cast out by her unforgiving mother when she needed her most.

This almost pathologically intense craving for motherhood, present in her right from the time she was a young girl, has its obverse in Smita's longing for another strong father figure in her life. She was always grateful for her father's silent support in her constant battles with a strong-willed mother.

Vidyatai shares a letter that Smita wrote as an adult, a note scribbled on a sheet of paper at an airport and sent through a driver.

> My dearest dearest Papa,
>
> A man who I feel is a realized man, I admire you, in every moment of your life. Your sense of justice, love, compassion, and above all, your capacity to be at peace with yourself. The most envious moments are of course when in the middle of a complete paranoid madness of Maa and your daughters, you are peacefully watering your plants. I wish I could be one hundredth of you. Sixty years of your life have passed and it seems to me that you have just begun – for us and for the people. I love you.

This need for expressing emotion on an impulse, without premeditation, springs from a childhood that is secure, yet beset by insecurities that unravel over an all too short a lifetime.

Did she have a middle-child syndrome? Something even her immediate family was not aware of, but a soul sister she related to later on in life perhaps knew of? Allied to this underlying insecurity is Smita's dark complexion. Her mother, Anita and Manya are light-skinned and Shivajirao is dark. Did she nurse an inferiority complex over it? Anita muses long and hard, but can't get to a definite answer. Smita was habitually called Kali, Kaluram, Ghatan – by her mother, her many friends – and she did not seem to mind it, but it could have led to a complex, Anita concedes. There is an inherent sexism in how we Indians perceive dark skin and Anita is aware of it. 'Maa called Papa Krishna and it was not considered derogatory at home.' It is

poetic justice of sorts that this very dusky look gave Smita her unique status in art cinema. It did become a problem in commercial films, though. Anita recalls a telling incident.'At the Delhi Film Festival in the early 1980s, when I was in India, we (Smita, Poonam Dhillon and I) had forgotten our delegate badges. They allowed Poonam in but not Smi because she did not look like a film star.' The film being screened was *Chakra*. Our fair and lovely hang-up did not even spare an iconic National Award–winning actor!

A soul sister Smita met much later empathized immediately. Aruna Raje Patil, film-maker and editor, was also a middle child among three sisters, noticeably darker than the rest. The bonding between Smi and Aruna was immediate, instinctive and lasted a lifetime. Aruna rationalizes that an underlying insecurity – whether acknowledged or not – impelled them to become achievers. The preordained road to Smita's impressive success – *staggering* is more appropriate – started in the city of Peshwas and took her to the glitz and glamour of Bombay. Much against her will, it needs to be said.

2

Reluctant Move to Beckoning Bombay

Maximum city. One that never sleeps. Paved with shards of shattered tinsel dreams. A city of gold and a city of dross. Of unlimited opportunity and doomed despair. A cityscape relentlessly churning out cheerful throngs of people, pushing them into shared communal living and atomized existence, on the path to pervasive alienation. Recycled clichés these, but as clichés come, all with an infinitesimal grain of truth. Bombay exudes its special mystique and few are immune to its charms. A formidable force unto itself, threatening to swallow the individual and reduce her to anonymity in its greedy, gaping maw, luring victims with the mesmerizing power of a siren's song. It is a magnet that attracts and repels.

Smita resisted the lure as long as she could. She was no stranger to the pull of the place, having visited often enough growing up in Pune. She wanted to pursue her studies at Pune's Fergusson College after finishing school. Shivajirao moved to Bombay in 1969. Initially, only Anita accompanied him and they lived in A/4 Foreshore Road – one of the ministerial bungalows. Vidyatai stayed back in Pune for nearly a year to wind up things. She too moved to Bombay with Manya while Smita stayed with her friend Chingi on Tilak Road for her final school year. Eventually, Smita had to pay heed to the family's call and join them in Bombay, where her father was serving as Cabinet minister.

What made her resist so long? Pune offered the warmth of the womb and the challenging freedom of the playground. Not just a comfort zone of familiarity and extended familial support but also a

circle of friends who remained friends for life. For all its rootedness, Pune was not provincial. True, it lacked the cosmopolitan sheen of Bombay, but its enriching cultural milieu – of literature, drama, music and the all-important Film and Television Institute (FTII) – was a nurturing place for a creatively inclined sensibility. Smita was completely at home in the vibrant environs of Theatre Academy where, along with stalwarts like Jabbar Patel, Satish Alekar and Mohan Agashe (all founder members), many young enthusiasts formed a close- knit group. Smita used to frequent the FTII campus. P.K. Nair, India's pioneering film archivist, recalls: 'My initial introduction to Smita Patil was when she used to come to FTII to watch evening screenings, along with some of her Theatre Academy friends. She was then working in a play put up by Theatre Academy in Pune. One of her friends introduced her to me as an ardent film lover interested in serious cinema. She was a regular visitor of the archive's evening screenings.'

Being spotted so often on campus encouraged the erroneous assumption that Smita too was an FTII alumna. She is a graduate by association, inclination and achievement, acting in the best films of Ketan Mehta, Saeed Mirza, alongside actors like Shabana Azmi, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah, to name the most famous. India's finest technicians – cinematographers Shaji Karun, Binod Pradhan, Rajen Kothari, sound recordists Paddy (Padmanabhan), Hitu (Hitendra Ghosh) – are a few FTII alumni who captured her unforgettable presence and haunting voice for posterity. Smita Patil is, veritably, an honorary graduate of FTII.

Mohan Agashe goes further back in time and remembers meeting Smita at the house of Rohini Bhagawat, Chingi to her friends: 'Smita's closest friend Chingi was with her at Bhave school and her house was a sort of adda for everyone. Subhya [Subhash Awchat, the painter], Mohan Gokhale, Raju [Chingi's cousin], Satish [Alekar] … we all met there since it was a central place. We rehearsed there. Smita's father had shifted to Bombay because he had become a minister but she was studying at Fergusson and stayed back. She was like a second daughter to Chingi's mother. I remember that the first time I saw Smita, Chingi's mother was neglecting Chingi and me, which she would not ordinarily do. All her attention was focussed on this ordinary-looking dark girl, plying her with a lot of questions about her well-being in a very intimate tone. Obviously, I must have been a bit jealous. I asked, who is this Kali? Everyone called her Kali – you must have heard it from others. With her Seva Dal background, she was not new to the stage and part of the group that would come to rehearsals. She acted in a play, Suhas Tambe's production of *Beej*. It was the common bond of friendship, with a bit of fighting, arguing, like all

friendships are. Soon after, she had to go to Bombay. It was around 1972–73. *Ghashiram* had opened, and of course, there was the controversy. Chingi's house continued to be the adda and there was a lot to talk about.'

A later friend, sound recordist Hitendra Ghosh, who truly discovered Smita the actor, says that she loved the stage, and when he first met her in 1974, films were far from her mind. She took him to see many Marathi plays whenever she came to Pune and he was at FTII. Though *Ghashiram Kotwal* was a settled unit with the cast in place, Smita hankered to be part of it; she even badgered Mohan Agashe, who was the lead player and star, to get her into a play she loved for its musical structure.

Jabbar Patel, who directed this landmark theatre production that won Satyajit Ray's praise, was widely invited to perform at home and abroad. Inevitably, Vijay Tendulkar's subversion of Maratha history drew the Shiv Sena's wrath and they unleashed vitriolic hatred upon the creators of this wonderfully inventive classic of Indian theatre. Jabbar Patel and Tendulkar were destined to play seminal roles in Smita's career.

Smita's Pune friend circle was eclectic. While she was friends with many of her own age group, she was also extraordinarily nurturing towards her younger friends, casual on the surface but deeply caring and thoughtful. Ravi Deshpande counts her as a major influence in his life. Assistant director (AD) and documentary film-maker, executive producer on a lot of films, and an associate of Santosh Sivan, Ravi fondly remembers how giving Smita was to the gangling teenager he was at the time. She gave him her jeans – he was skinny then – and he wore them even though his parents were aghast that he wore a girl's jeans. He used to live in a flat near Pune station that belonged to Subhash Awchat. Smita would ride up to his house on her Vespa and shout out Gundya! She would bear him off to the FTII, which was a favourite haunt. Ravi fast-forwards in time to Smita the star. She saw him devour Satyajit Ray's *Our Films Their Films*, totally in thrall of the master. She took the gawky seventeen-year-old to the location shoot of *Sadgati* (it was near Raipur) as he watched at work, awestruck, the young woman who mentored him and the great film-maker. He also observed her on the shoot of Jabbar Patel's *Umbartha*.

Ravi recalls another endearing quality of hers – the way Smita personalized her gifts, right from the time she was a teenager, be it a photograph she clicked or a sketch she made or a book. She always wrote something special, to make the moment something to be cherished. 'It was as if she brought everything in her to be distilled into that moment of giving,' says Ravi, searching for words to articulate an ineffable feeling. No wonder her letters and gifts are

something that the receivers cherish and will not part with. It was this encircling warmth of friends that she was reluctant to leave behind for the engulfing anonymity of Bombay.

Subhash Awchat, Subhya to intimates, is another childhood friend who shared a close, often tumultuous relationship with Smita. She careened all over Pune on his scooter that she constantly borrowed. Five years older, he recalls their fierce arguments that sometimes escalated into nasty fights, so much so that Vidyatai would have to intervene and separate them from coming to blows. Jhelum recalls the rage with which Smita threw a glass of water at his face after a heated argument at one of their regular hangouts and walked off fuming. She did have a quick temper, and acting on impulse was part of who she was all her life. Smita was, and still is, a constant in Subhash's life. He is a charismatic, often abrasive character, with a fund of stories about a person he knew as a child, having watched her grow as they pursued different fields.

Subhash gave up his career as a graphic artist in advertising with the telling, oft-quoted comment: 'I can't sell shampoo for the rest of my life.' He is an eminent contemporary painter and a well-known author – his provocative Marathi novel *Madam*(out of print, and considered exploitative by some fastidious critics) is a thinly disguised narrative of Smita's life. I have no independent opinion on the book since I cannot read Marathi. He has dedicated his musings on art to her; yet, there is no portrait of her in his Bandra studio where we sprawl on a thick floor mattress, sipping tea, as afternoon sunlight filters through a wall of windows. On the wall across the room is a large abstract, a work in progress. Once, Smita came and splashed paint all over a freshly painted wall, just for the kick it gave her. For all their fights, it was Smita who worked indefatigably for Subhash's first exhibition at Bombay's Jehangir Art Gallery. By that time, she was living in Bombay, and worked every contact to fill the gallery for the opening. She helped hang the paintings, then zoomed across to Khadi Bhandar to buy him a shirt, and sent him marching to wash his face and change his clothes. He remembers that she buttoned up his shirt.

How closely Smita's presence was interwoven in the lives of Subhash and his ex-wife Sumita is an extraordinary tribute to the depth of their friendship and Smita's generous inclusion of a new person into the warmth of a tight, somewhat unconventional, circle. Sumita (now Sumita Naren, settled in the Netherlands) is remarkably frank in tracing this abiding relationship.

'I basically met Smita when I was sixteen and seeing Subhash. He was a very dear friend of hers. A very long and deep relationship that endured. When I met her, she had just done *Charandas Chor*. She

constantly joked with Subhya, “How’s your sixteen-year-old friend?” Their friendship was very open. It was an intellectual and creative support system. She would buy him books, maybe on art. She came and stayed with us, for a week or four days – a home base for Smi when she wanted to get away from Bombay. Smi was homey and comfortable with us.

‘I never felt excluded from their friendship. I was very naïve and innocent. Actually, Smita would jokingly ask,“Why are you never jealous?” But I never was. At that time, all I wanted was to get married and make a home. I had no other ambitions. Over time, I was so comfortable with her in our home that all three of us slept on the same bed with no hesitation.

‘I grew intellectually from the simple middle-class girl that I was. She inspired me intellectually, encouraged me to forge an identity for myself. Maybe Subhash wanted it too and could not say it directly; perhaps he said it through Smita. It came from her. She sent me the right books, talking at length about all sorts of things. She talked of motivation, relationships with men, women’s sexuality and how it was projected, especially in commercial cinema. She was a Bohemian at heart.

‘Actually, all the Patil women influenced me. Each of them had a distinct individuality, a strong group of characterful women. Ma was an inspiring figure. I learnt to be articulate about my feelings and thoughts. From wanting to be a housewife, I was a landscape designer in India for twenty years. Smi had the capacity to remain friends with both Subhash and me even after we had split up.’

If Smita could be a source of strength to others, she could find strength to embrace change in her own life. She overcame an understandable fear of losing her identity in Bombay’s engulfing anonymity. One would suppose that their father’s ministerial position would alleviate such fears. But while in school, the Patil girls did not leverage the fact that their father was an MLA. They did not broadcast their father’s status in Bombay either, even though it helped Smita enrol in Elphinstone College. Anita joined J.J. Medical College, acquiescing to her mother’s ambition for her eldest. ‘I have not regretted it,’ Anita asserts. Why should she, when she went on to get a degree in public health and urbanization from Harvard! She uses that expertise now, in her work with Pukar, which offers a platform for cross-disciplinary research and critical methods for intervention. ‘It is very satisfying,’ says a visibly fulfilled Anita.

That things were not easy for the sisters is an understatement. They had studied in Marathi-medium schools and the switch to English was tough. Even tougher was the supercilious sneering they were subjected to at college from‘the hi-fi English-speaking crowd that

had a condescending attitude. We were the ghatis.' Anita can now shrug off the barbs but you can sense the hurt under the rational explanation. She was close to Smita but also empathized with the vulnerability of her kid sister. 'So it is natural that we had insecurities…about our language skills, our small-town identities, our communication skills. They were the toughest five years of my life,' she recalls, speaking impeccable English with the poise of a successful professional.

Shyam Benegal also remembers the insecurities of a small- town girl when she was thrown into the cosmopolitan sea of cinema; even if it was not Bollywood, there was glamour of an arty kind that haloed this new creative world.

Anita is nostalgic as she remembers their college days. 'Smi had no communication problems when she worked with the poor and marginalized in villages outside Mumbai and she was perfectly happy doing that when she was in college. Because that was exactly her forte. She had communication problems with the elite at Xavier's, where she opted for English literature, but never any with the disenfranchised when she went out with her group on fieldwork trips.' A passionate avowal from the eldest daughter of a family where social work was a *rog*, as Vidyatai describes their affliction. 'Smi was very proud that her Tai was a doctor.' Modesty and satisfaction vie with each other in Anita's tone as she thinks back to those years in Bombay.

In an indulgent tone, Shivajirao talks about how Smita wanted to change colleges in Bombay. She got admission easily enough at Elphinstone – an impressive institution, not only for its semi-Gothic architecture but its academic credentials and the air of purposefulness that defined it. She found it boring – 'like a government institution' – in the words of her father. From childhood, it was her father Smita went to every time she wanted something really badly. The mother was always the enforcer of discipline. Smita wanted the excitement and the cool of being a Xavierite. The cool factor defines Xavier's to this day.

Excitement of another sort came unbidden to Smita. Her entry into Doordarshan (DD) is dramatic, as if scripted by an unseen hand. A riotously famous story, it must be recorded here once more. Let Anita, who played the stellar role, tell the tale that happened by pure chance.

'My classmate Tipdya [Tikekar] came from Pune. The newsreader for Marathi news at DD was Jyotsna Kirpekar [she had a big fan following for her fair, pretty looks and chirpy demeanour] and her husband Deepak Kirpekar [now a renowned uro-surgeon in Pune] were part of our gang of four. Deepak was fond of photography. He

used to take a lot of pictures of Smi … *chalo apni ghar ka model hai na*, let's shoot, he'd boast. I had a scooter, Tipdya had a scooter, and Babya, a bike. I was the only girl among the boys, a tomboy riding a scooter. I must say I was very good at it. A couple of weeks earlier, he had taken a lot of pictures of Smi in different outfits. He wanted to show them to Jo. So, after classes, at five, we went to Worli [the Mumbai DD location]. There was some construction going on there, a lot of rubble was lying around. He found a flat surface and spread out the photos. We were just hanging around when the DD director [the redoubtable P.V. Krishnamurthy] passed by. He knew us, of course, because we used to go over often to meet Jo.

'"What are you guys doing here?" he asked. Then he looked at Smi's pictures and said,"Who's she?" He wanted to meet her! The question was: who was going to tell her? Jo and I finally coaxed her. She was not interested at all. I put her on my scooter behind me and went for an audition. Smi sang the Bangladesh national anthem '*Amaar sonar Bangla*'. She was versatile in that way and picked up languages easily. Smi was selected and started reading the news.'

The whole experience was just a passing bit of fun for Smita; little did she realize then of the impact she had made.

The newsreader made news. TV then was black-and-white. Her sculpted face, long tapering eyebrows framed the dark depths of her gaze. A big round bindi drew attention to the defining hairline of a classic brow. Full sensuous lips, a husky vibrant voice. You forgot what she was saying in Marathi and drowned in the ebb and flow of that modulated voice. The traditional border of a handloom sari as it lay draped across her chest invited you to notice her long slender neck. A lot of people who did not know how to speak Marathi tuned into Marathi news. She did not flaunt boutique-bought ethnic chic but the persona that came across was uniquely individual – dusky, earthy, as attainable as the girl next door's familiar charm, but elusive in its indefinable star quality.

There is a lovely story about her elegant handloom saris that drew admiring oohs and aahs. Smita reportedly draped them in a hurry over the jeans she lived in, just minutes before going on air. Did she relish the joke she was playing on her audience and chuckle to herself? Spontaneity and that famous air of gravitas was her distinctive blend, like a rare wine maturing in a deep dark cellar of a historic chateau.

It's amazing how many film-makers of such differing sensibilities and film-making styles noticed this face the camera loved. Arun Khopkar chose Smita for his diploma film at the suggestion of Mani Kaul, among others. He is the first director who cast Smita. Everyone knows that Shyam Benegal saw this dusky teenager on TV and set her on the path to stardom. So did Manoj Kumar and Dev Anand who

wanted her to act in their films. Though Smita did not appear in any of Mr Bharat's films, she did act in *Anand Aur Anand*, Dev Anand's launch pad for his son Suneil.

Smita was on the way to becoming a minor celebrity but this did not come in the way of her friendships, old and new. Jhelum was studying in Ruparel College and Smita would go there frequently. 'We had a particular spot, a hideaway,' Jhelum says, smiling at the memory of those casual frequent meetings that saw them share so many things. Smita used to write a lot of letters from Pune but, naturally, these got rarer when she moved to Bombay. The Varde house – whether the bungalow, a little away from other ministerial residences when Prof. Varde was education minister during 1978–80, or Rylstone, the Carmichael Road house – was her second home. She lived with them when she had to go to Jaslok hospital for some treatment, Jhelum doesn't remember the exact details.'I feel cleansed in this house, if I have done something wrong,' is Smita's spontaneous confession that a bemused Jhelum recalls.

Recognition was pouring in and, initially, she was discomfited with the attention she drew as a DD newsreader. Once, Jhelum and another friend of hers were to meet Smita at Regal. Smita was a little early and trying hard to hide behind a scrawny tree. That dense shopping area, abutting Colaba Causeway, hardly had any trees. Smita was disproportionately relieved when she spotted Jhelum. There is an intriguing contrary streak in Smita. According to Jhelum, she was proud of her toned body and had no inhibitions showing it off in Western outfits. She also had the knack of passing unnoticed in public, dressed in well-worn jeans and scruffy tee or a baggy kurta.

Rauf Ahmed, veteran journalist, recalls his first meeting ruefully. He was a rookie at *Free Press Journal* and was not doing film journalism. He had met her father a couple of times and knew him. Rauf describes the first memorable encounter.'I first met Smita in 1975, in the wake of rumours that Shyam Benegal, who had earlier discovered Shabana Azmi, was going to make a film with her. More than the news, the opportunity to meet the dusky, intense-eyed woman I had often seen on television reading news, drove me to grab the assignment.

'It was Smita's first-ever interview. "How do we recognize each other?" she had asked when I had called to fix an appointment. "Don't worry about that, I will recognize you," I had said, confident of spotting her. Her dusky image as seen on the small screen was etched in my memory.

'There was no sign of Ms Patil as I waited at a corner table at Samovar, a popular haunt inside Jehangir Art Gallery. After a while, I came out and stood at the entrance to the gallery. I saw a girl in a

faded pair of jeans and a casual off-white top get out of a white Volkswagen and walk in. It didn't occur to me that she could be the dusky, intense-eyed "desi" girl I was waiting for. She walked into Samovar and then came out, went up to a public telephone in the gallery and got into a long conversation. I decided to leave. As I was passing her, I recognized the distinct voice. It was she, Smita Patil!

'"I was sure you'd have problems," she said, laughing. "I am very photogenic." Pause."How does one go about an interview?" she asked me hesitantly. Let's just chat, I said. Smita didn't sound too excited about the film she was going to do for Shyam Benegal. "After I put down the receiver, I was wondering what I'd talk to you about. If I had your telephone number, I'd have called back to cancel the meeting." Small mercies, I thought.'

That was how her first interview happened and Rauf Ahmed got a lot of calls for it.'I did it differently, I did not know what a film interview was supposed to be like. I got a good interview unlike the usual heroine talk. She had done Arun Khopkar's diploma film and I knew Shyam Benegal was considering casting her. But she said she was not interested in films.' Rauf reiterates that she meant it. 'My Hindi is bad, so I don't know how I will do it. I am clumsy and I can't deal with all that glamour,' admitted Smita. Rauf put all of that into his interview and she was happy with the truth. Her father called him over for tea at the Forjett Street house in Tardeo. Thus began a professional acquaintance that blossomed into close friendship. 'I did another interview but Smita was reluctant. Let me do something more before you interview me.' In an industry where both established stars and wannabes kill for publicity, Smita was refreshingly different. And this resistance to interviews, unless it was to promote a film dear to her, or a cause she believed in, continued.

The funny thing was, as Rauf Ahmed's career progressed and he was the editor of *Super*, Smita tried to dissuade him from film journalism. She wanted Rauf and Ayesha Kagal, with perhaps Rauf 's friend Chaitanya Kalbag joining in, to start a non-filmi magazine, devoted to socio-political issues. And she would try to get hold of some funding for it. By this time, Smita was very close to Ayesha Kagal, who went on to become a journalist like her well-known parents (her mother, a writer, and father, a leading journalist with the *Times of India*).They had met in college and formed a lifelong bond. So bereaved is the reticent Ayesha that, sadly, she backed out of sharing memories of a woman she was so close to and mourned so deeply.

Even as she made new friendships, Smita was true to her old loyalties. Besides Subhash, Mohan Agashe was a frequent visitor and stayed in the Forjett Street house for weeks. 'It is a thick friendship, I did not want to publicize it,' says Agashe. 'I was a young doctor and

she was reading news on DD. Soon I realized that there is not a single man who did not fall in love within the first five minutes. Ten minutes of interacting with her, and every man was in love. And every man truly felt that she loved only him. *Is ke upar jhagda hota tha*.“I didn’t do anything!” she would say. If Smita felt a man misinterpreted her friendship, she would let him know, and the fellow would be like a fish out of water. This was true not only about men, but women too. She had a lot of close women friends who had nothing to do with films, like Ayesha Kagal and Vaiju Narwane who is now in Paris.’

She never harboured any dreams about being an actress, let alone a star. This is the consensual opinion of family and friends. But then, fate decreed otherwise. Through the intervention of two film-makers – Shyam Benegal, the mentor who shaped her career, and Jabbar Patel, old theatre friend who was like an indulgent older brother.

3

The Seminal Seventies

If the TV screen was her window to the world, the world too fell in love with this striking presence encased in the twenty- two-inch black-and-white frame. Much later, TV actors went on to become huge film stars, and none bigger than Shah Rukh Khan. What is so amazing in Smita's case is that she did not come from the world of fiction and TV soaps. Hers was the factual world of news – truly the exception in tinsel town. In a little over half a decade, she made the latter half of the 1970s a seminal period in our film history with varied roles, with directors who brought very different sensibilities to their craft. *Nishant*, *Bhumika*, *Jait Re Jait*, *Gaman* – any newcomer would be proud to be a part of the creation of such significant landmarks in such a short time, and the good work continued into the first couple of years of the next decade.

Befittingly, her first role was in *Teevra Madhyam*, the prize-winning diploma film that discovered her capacity for emoting through stillness, to stand the unsparing scrutiny of the close-up. Paradoxically, Smita was not the first choice of Arun Khopkar, FTII graduate, film-maker, writer, linguist and scholar of cinema and aesthetics. His cinema eschews the overtly dramatic and explores the symbiotic relationship between image, sound and movement. He believes that austerity, a kind of cinematic purity, can evoke a layered narrative. In *Teevra Madhyam*, he explores the relationship of a college lecturer, who is deeply devoted to classical music, with her friend (Nachiket Patwardhan, an architect, art director and film-maker, Chinnu to friends), who is drawn into playing an activist role in left

politics. Her pursuit of music is dismissed as feudal by the group that brings out a leftist newsletter, cyclostyled copies clandestinely churned out. A political leader comes in and tells them it is now time for action and gives a call to go on strike. The scenes – indoors and outdoors – between the couple are long takes where a lot is inferred from the silences and carefully constructed soundtrack.

Khopkar uses sound – her singing and the man's voice – with finesse to build up layers of meaning in a thesis that examines the lack of understanding of music and the arts by doctrinaire leftism. The first image of Smita before the camera is a chiselled, clean-cut profile with a tanpura held against her face, long slim fingers plucking the strings with measured rhythm. You see those fingers again, subtly beating a rhythm to the atonal sounds coming from outside, as she stands framed beside a door. You take in the sharp nose, finely boned cheeks, full sensuous lips, wide, elongated eyes under arched brows defining a thoughtful brow, and you know the camera is in love with her. It is astonishing how many people remember this image. Shabana recalls how arresting the face was. So does Saeed Mirza when it came to casting her as the strong, morally centred sister in *Albert Pinto*.

Smita's demeanour and graceful gait, as she walks with her friend who recites the elegy of Fortinbras, suggest her sensuousness and sensitivity. The artfully crafted soundtrack is crucial to the understanding of *Teevra Madhyam.* Hitendra Ghosh, Khopkar's batchmate, won the prize for sound, and Raymond Wong, the Chinese cameraman from Singapore, for cinematography. It is not often that a student film creates the kind of ripple effect that this one set off.

The story of how Smita came to act in this film is serendipity in action. Arun Khopkar and Hitendra Ghosh were part of the four-man group that was to make a twenty-minute film. Khopkar did not want an actress. Shabana was a batchmate who ended up being senior because hers was a two-year course and she was a lecturer by then.'I suppose she could have played the role, but the acting course was a bit problematic at the institute,' he clarifies. Before that, Khopkar had done a song picturization with Uma Ranganathan, an actor. Uma would have been his first choice but she had a limp in her left leg from childhood polio. Casting her would draw unnecessary attention to the limp and unintended meanings would be read into a meticulously crafted film. He showed the script to Mani Kaul. Mani remembered the face of a young newsreader but did not know her name.

In there lies an even more interesting tale. One evening, Ghosh and Khopkar were walking from the FTII campus to Pune's happening Deccan area, a distance of some two kilometres. On the way, they passed an electronics store with many television sets and most of them

had a close-up of this young woman with her defined cheekbones and striking eyes. Ghosh was struck and drew Khopkar's attention. With Mani Kaul's suggestion to reinforce the choice, all they had to do was find the girl.

Since there was only DD those days, it did not take rocket science to find out the name of the girl with the arresting face.'I went to Doordarshan and I was taken with Smita the moment I set eyes on her,' says Khopkar.

Ghosh made the first contact. He called Smita from the public phone by the gate of the institute and arranged to meet her. She showed up and the first thing she said was: 'You too are thin and dark like me!' That was the beginning of a friendship which soon made Ghosh a part of the Patil family when he moved to Bombay to work with Shyam Benegal. Benegal was his examiner and asked him to keep in touch should he come to Bombay. Ghosh shared many of Smita's passions – monsoon rains being one of them. He recalls how it started raining heavily one morning and he called Smita, courtesy the phone by the gate. This familiar black instrument, operated by a fifty-paisa coin and left unattended, was the lifeline of the students to the outside world. Trust the future film-makers to be ingenious. They devised a small rod with a hook that would operate the lever of the old-fashioned dial-up instrument in lieu of coins and made their free calls. A little after three in the afternoon, Smita appeared at the gate. She had come all the way from Bombay to get drenched in the rain. They both went up the hill behind the institute, where all of Pune lay before their eyes, covered in monsoon mists.

Coming back to this breakthrough diploma film, according to Ghosh, Smita instantly agreed to do it. It was a fun thing for her – ironic, considering how she had to stay still for the camera. Khopkar met her parents prior to the shoot. Vidyatai was all for it but she was doubtful about her husband's consent. Shivajirao, who was a minister, said many people had approached him for casting Smita after her TV appearance but he wanted her to finish her education. When the young student film-maker persuaded him that it would entail only five or six days of shooting, he agreed. In fact, Shivajirao felt that it was something Smita *ought* to do.

Khopkar is all praise. 'From that point on, there was no looking back. Smita was so hard-working. She knew dancing but playing the tanpura was different. She had to learn the proper rhythm – even if the tanpura is only a drone – and which note meant what. She worked on it.' About the famous long-held shot, Khopkar has an interesting anecdote to share.

'I told her it was going to be a long take, we could rehearse it a couple of times but there was restriction because of the amount of raw

stock I had. She had to blink to the rhythm of the music which she was hearing, but not singing. It was a very controlled sort of thing. After a minute or so, a fly settled on her hand. She couldn't break the rhythm, she continued the take. When the shot was over, everyone cheered, great! "Stop it!" she shouted and shook her hand vigorously, to the relieved laughter that greeted her. She was so involved that she wrote me some lovely letters … which I have unfortunately lost.'

Smita's habit of writing letters to people she grew close to is something so rare, more so in the hectic hurly burly of film- making. Khopkar adds, 'She became an extremely close friend. Her mother had great faith in me. It was 1974. By then Smita was getting so many film offers that Vidyatai felt, here was a man who would tell her daughter what is right and wrong without mincing words. That faith she had till the end of Smita's life.'

That was also the year when the arch rivals first met. Shabana saw *Teevra Madhyam* at Bombay's celebrated Akashwani Auditorium, for a brief time the little Mecca for art films. Onlookers like Mohan Agashe gleefully recreate the first meeting between the gifted actors destined to be rivals.'Shabana walked up to Smita and proclaimed, I am Shabana. You were good.' Were warning signals alerting the antenna of an actor who had tasted stardom with her first film, *Ankur*? This was one unacknowledged battle that lasted as long as Smita lived. Incidentally, Shabana admitted: 'Even before I met Smita, the first impression I have is of being struck by her in *Teevra Madhyam* by Arun Khopkar. There was a long shot of her on the tanpura and I was struck by her face.'

Three minor roles came about the next year. There is a bit of tussle between Shyam Benegal's *Charandas Chor* and Jabbar Patel's *Samna* – both made in 1975 – about which one qualifies as Smita's first feature film. *Charandas Chor*, the Chhattisgarhi folk drama made for the Children's Film Society (CFS), cast a teenaged Smita as the imperious young queen with speaking lines, while she makes a fleeting appearance, evocative of melancholic nostalgia, in Jabbar Patel's *Samna*.

Jabbar knew Smita from her Pune days. The first meeting between the actor in the making and a director who cast her in two brilliant career-defining films was unpropitious, to put it mildly. He was a post-grad medical student at Pune's Naidu hospital (the multi-talented Dr Jabbar Patel is a practising paediatrician) where Vidyatai was the matron. It was a spacious campus, spread over six to seven acres, with old-style bungalows for the senior staff. One evening, when he was hard at his studies, Jabbar was disturbed by the loud noise of children playing and the noisiest leader of the gang was this dark girl who looked to be around twelve or so. He called out to her and asked her

name; she replied, Smita. He scolded the sullen girl severely and asked to her go play elsewhere and not disturb him. Who are you? he asked. Matron Patil's daughter, came the muttered answer. Vidyatai told her this young man was well known in theatre with a big reputation in Maharashtra as a good actor–director. He might be, but he is very rude, was Smita's sulky rejoinder.

Like so many others, Jabbar Patel too saw her later on television. That was the time he was making his first Marathi film, *Samna*, scripted by Vijay Tendulkar which pitted two great actors, Nilu Phule and Shriram Lagu in a moral and political confrontation. Phule, the sugar factory owner in a small town, practically its de facto ruler, is trapped in a complex relationship with the alcoholic outsider, a maverick teacher who persistently poses provocative, intransigent questions. At a metaphorical level, it is a soul-searching indictment of our society's decline a quarter century after Independence. Jabbar felt the need for a figure who conveys the outsider's tragic past, a memory that he cherishes. He thought of Smita and her arresting face (the adjective crops up in conversations with so many people) as the presence that haunts the father's memory. Thus came about her fleeting, lyrical presence; clad in a white sari, she walks across an idyllic meadow. Her role was not part of the original script, since Tendulkar had written it with the two great thespians in mind, but Jabbar's intuition convinced both the famous scriptwriter and the producer, Ramdas Phutane. After all, he had proved his innovative, creative credentials with the stupendous success of *Ghashiram Kotwal*.

So widely known, and thereby almost a cliché, is the tale of Shyam Benegal and his discovery. The legendary director with an exceptionally perceptive casting eye, credited with giving the largest number of actors that all-important break, recognized Smita's potential with the unerring expertise of a jeweller chancing upon a rare gem.

Without any claims to false modesty, Benegal says: 'I have a way, I don't know what it is … of being able to tell how people will photograph. With Smita, no one would think that she'd make a film star. A, because in India you have this bias against darker skin. It is ridiculous but that's the way it is. We are one of the most colour-conscious people in the world. B, how does having an attractive personality translate in physical terms? That's very difficult to understand, but sometimes you know that this person has it. I felt that from the beginning, from what I saw on TV and Khopkar's film. I could tell that this girl would photograph brilliantly. She also has a very sympathetic presence. Even that matters. You see, a person with a sympathetic presence allows you access as a human being. Now, allowing that access comes from personality and physical features.

Like the way a person smiles, looks serious. These things are very important for an actor because it is a projection. In her case, it was a natural projection. This natural projection, whichever way she felt, you could see it on her face.'

The birth of such a bright star comes late in the narrative of *Charandas Chor* (1975). The film recasts a Chhattisgarhi folk play, made famous on the stage by that doyen of folk theatre, Habib Tanvir, into cinematic form that uses early silent comedy, slapstick, with title cards that describe action that is to ensue. An episodic narrative chronicles the clever thief 's wit and the ingenuity with which he wriggles out of every scrape he gets into, deliberately or accidentally. The classic idiot is his sidekick, harbouring ambitions to prove a worthy disciple of the guru of scams. Broad farce gives way to satire as the film progresses. Smita's Rani Kalavati enters at this point where political references are easy to spot. She is pretty, imperious and impervious to criticism. She is pert and queenly, gladdening the eye that has only seen unprepossessing faces till then. Could her queen be a disguised-in-period-costume reference to the Indira Gandhi of Emergency days? Smita has an amused attitude to the notorious thief and his cleverness wins her over. When he refuses to marry her as she expects, she makes a graceful capricious gesture, an elegant finger sliding across her throat. An equivalent of the Queen of Hearts' 'off with his head' command. *Charandas Chor* is a minor film that Benegal obviously enjoyed making. A charmingly boisterous caper, with the Benegal stamp of ensemble performances, it still remains one of the premier productions of the Children's Film Society of India.

The Second Lead Steals the Scene

In a memorable cast of known and new names, the credits of Benegal's truly epic film read, 'Introducing Smita'. What an unforgettable introduction it proved to be! Though Smita's is a small role in terms of screen time, the scale and significance of *Nishant* need to be described at length.

Impressed by her buoyant spiritedness, pliancy and promise of adaptability, Benegal cast Smita in a small, totally different but significant role in *Nishant* (1975), the second film of his loosely linked rural trilogy that examines the many facets of declining feudalism and the inevitability of change wrought by the forces of modernity. A director rarely begins his career with a trilogy. Satyajit Ray's path-breaking *Apu Trilogy* was an inspirational landmark. Shyam Benegal bravely took up the challenge in his own style, exploring personal preoccupations in an idiom he made so felicitously his own. It is a given that a thinking film-maker of the 1970s, acutely alive to socio-economic problems, would have leftist leanings, or at least be partial

to the underprivileged. This empathy for the underprivileged would have been reinforced by a shared difficulty in pursuing his chosen vocation in a medium as commerce- driven as cinema.

The hardships faced by new cinema votaries in the 1970s were very real – problems of finance, distribution, the effort of reaching out to a wider audience that is fed up of mainstream cinema's formulaic inanities but unsure of what to look for in the nascent movement that offered a meaningful, intelligent alternative. In this context, one would normally not expect a new film-maker to take on the challenges of sustaining his preoccupations over three films. But Benegal was prepared – intellectually and artistically – to make *Ankur*, which lay like a dormant seedling waiting to grow, while he honed his craft making ad films for a leading agency.

The best trilogies are not planned as such but take shape almost organically. The film-maker's sensibility finds themes that seem to flow into each other and he has the craftsmanship to translate those themes into images that, at one level, tell human stories, and at the same time, tantalize you with layers of a rich subtext that yield many meanings.

Benegal came to cinema equipped with intellectual honesty and passion to translate ideas into compelling stories. His objective vision and rigorous research helped because he is a pragmatist who has made the films he has wanted to make, and very often, on his own terms. This strong sense of commitment to a vision of film as a means to communicate ideas through stories told in an engaging way is an article of faith with Benegal.

The other factor that shaped and explained Benegal's credo was the ferment in Hyderabad as it was caught in the turbulent cross-currents of history. This feudal enclave was known for its confluence of cultures and languages – Hindu and Muslim, Telugu and Urdu – and basic tolerance at the ground level even as the peasantry groaned under an exploitative superstructure.

Grounding in left history and philosophy, sympathy for the marginalized and a born storyteller's ability to shape ideas into credible, layered human story are the hallmark of Benegal's early oeuvre. The whole is limned by the ambiguities of existentialism. That is why, what could have been agenda-driven tracts are transformed into remarkable films that seem to have grown naturally out of the hardy Deccan soil that nurtures both lush- green paddies and spiky, stunted bushes. Sculptured rock formations loom unexpectedly, highlighting the drama of the landscape against which people, long inured to exploitation, surge into revolt, however brief or chaotic. One of Benegal's greatest strengths is to root his characters in a definable landscape, capturing not just the architectural and social details, but

also the nuances of parlance and the rhythms of daily life.

Madhava Prasad, an academic who has studied the ideology underpinning cinema, popular and parallel, in *The Ideology of Hindi Cinema* (OUP), saddles Benegal with the parentage of what he calls the 'developmental aesthetic'. Confining his study to *Ankur*, *Nishant* and *Manthan*, Prasad argues that these films are a realistic construct to deal with our feudal past and this distances them from contemporary political reality. A rigidly Marxist analysis is blind to Benegal's extraordinary generosity to his actors who create living people – Lakshmi and Surya in *Ankur*; Vishwam, Sushila and Rukmini in *Nishant*; Bindu and Bhola in *Manthan* – who have their own social, sexual and political points to make. More importantly, the stories and people have contemporary resonance.

Coming back to the seedling that grew into a landmark of Indian cinema, Anant Nag's Surya and Shabana Azmi's Lakshmi rise above the stereotypical wicked landlord and exploited peasant woman, to suggest unspoken mutual awareness and imperfect understanding. Benegal bided his time with the story of *Ankur* he had written many years earlier while he harboured the hope of getting star power to make a gritty, unusual theme palatable to the audience. After three big stars turned down the role played by Shabana Azmi, deeming it 'unglamorous', he decided to trust the new malleable talent of unknown names. The rest, as they say, is history. Surya is not a paper villain nor is Lakshmi the woman of unsullied virtue seduced by the personable young man. A complex of real feelings, of need and dependency, grows between what the world deems social unequals.

The tone and tenor of *Nishant* are far more grim, set against a largely arid landscape. The year is 1945. The place, an unnamed feudal state, but it is clearly Hyderabad under the Nizam's rule. Shot in Pochampalli, the narrow streets of the village are dusty and nondescript. The jagirdar's haveli is a stark statement of inherited power. The other notable landmark and site of important action, the temple, is reached through the discoloured stonewalls of what looks like a ruined fortress. There is a wider cast of characters, strongly individualized while being representative of their class.

Before the schoolmaster and his family enter the village and set off a chain reaction of escalating violence, we meet the four brothers of the ruling jagirdar family. Anna (Amrish Puri) is the eldest and he rules with an iron fist from behind a façade of noblesse oblige. The inborn arrogance is unmistakable. He is ruthless while ordering his minions to seize a sharecropper's harvest or ordering the police Patil Shamsuddin (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) to do his unlawful bidding. The two middle brothers, played with sadistic glee and comical zest by Anant Nag and Mohan Agashe, do the dirty work. They abuse anyone

coming in the way of their motorbike and order a labourer to send his young wife to the haveli that night. The evenings are spent drinking heavily and making raunchy jokes, mostly at the expense of the youngest brother Vishwam (Naseeruddin Shah).

Vishwam is timid, doesn't really have the stomach for drink and smutty talk, but he is bullied into being like the older brothers, much to the disgust of his young wife Rukmini (Smita Patil) who remonstrates with him not to follow in their debauched footsteps.

You first see Smita sleeping beside her husband, in half profile before she turns her face to the camera – a smudged big bindi, a big nose stud. She asks Vishwam where he was the whole night and soon notices that his locket is missing. Search for it, is his careless answer.'You lose it and I must look for it?' is her terse rejoinder. She is no meek, traditional wife. But she is unaware of what the brothers did – break into the temple and steal the deity's jewels. The blasphemy of the act does not bother them – except for the fact that Vishwam lost his chain and locket at the temple. Something the big brother gets back nonchalantly from the phlegmatic pujari who is in no position to ask why it landed there on the night of the theft.

It is a curious all-male household in which only Vishwam is married and the other brothers seek their pleasure elsewhere. Rukmini serves a largely ceremonial purpose, receiving the temple procession car and offering auspicious haldi-kumkum and clothes to newlyweds who make the obligatory first stop at the haveli.

Into this milieu where naked oppression is the norm, come the new schoolmaster (Girish Karnad) and his wife Sushila (Shabana Azmi) with their little son. The idealistic teacher is not so oblivious to what is going on when the two middle brothers ogle Sushila lasciviously and Vishwam casts lovelorn looks at her. She is clearly intrigued but keeps a disdainful distance.

When the older brothers see Vishwam's state, they get into action; they coolly abduct Sushila one night, in the presence of her husband and a few neighbours who are idling nearby. Now begins the teacher's nightmare. Nobody – not the village cop, nor the collector or editor of a newspaper in a nearby town, not even a lawyer – is willing to take on the jagirdar. Defeated, the humiliated teacher comes back to face the pity of his neighbours.

Meanwhile, at the big house, Rukmini goes about her routine, doing puja to the tulsi plant in the balcony, tending her husband solicitously as he throws up, after his brothers force him to drink beyond what he can hold. 'Why do you copy them?' Her question suggests that she has done this before without much effect. The debauched laughter – for example, when the middle brothers compare a woman to a cow: Anna never bothered to tether a cow in the house,

preferred bazaar milk instead – is a constant in the gloomy haveli. When the raunchy talk gets too much for him, Vishwam goes to his wife, taps her awake and she embraces him – faults and all. Smita achieves a nice blend of exasperation and tired resignation. She is obviously the more dominant person in this marriage, while the other marriage we see, of the teacher and Sushila, is between equals.

There is a subtle difference in the body language of the two women. Both are married, Sushila is older. She wears a bright ribbon in her hair, has a cool stare and confident stride – of a teacher's wife, who thus feels more educated and slightly superior to the village women. Rukmini is still a young bride in an all- male household – not a dewy innocent but not worldly wise either – who enjoys the status of the chatelaine of a traditional haveli. The changing dynamics between the two women is a fascinating play of shifting power, changing sympathies and inevitable jealousies. Yet, on fleeting occasions, they relate to each other as women.

Many post-abduction scenes revolve around Rukmini. She gets up in the morning, her husband lying beside her but not sleeping. He watches her expressionlessly as she opens the window, and bows to the morning sun. Her routine is serene. The maid, Pochamma, pours water over her head and tells her of the poor woman in the storeroom, left weeping.

Hearing the puja bell, Sushila comes out and sees Rukmini doing puja. On seeing her, Rukmini calls out to the maid and tells her to give Sushila toothpowder, like a good hostess, and continues her pradakshina. Later, when Pochamma comes back with dinner, complaining that both breakfast and lunch were untouched, Rukmini gets up. She upbraids her, saying she must have taunted the poor woman or spoken harshly. She takes the food to the hostage.

The camera first shows Rukmini's feet at the door, travels up her body to rest on her face, concern creasing her smooth brow. The camera's position, Rukmini standing and Sushila on the floor, implicitly indicates the gulf between mistress of the house and disgraced victim. But there is also an intimation of closeness, because they are in a small room strewn with discarded objects. It is Rukmini who bridges the distance. She crouches beside Sushila and tells her: 'Think of your child, you must live at least for him.' Taking the stale food back, she pauses and says, 'Don't be obstinate, eat', in a matter of fact but practical way of showing she cares. Next, she takes out a sari and blouse, tells Pochamma to give it to Sushila the next morning. Smita is all quiet dignity and grace here, while Shabana looks at her in mute anguish, not acknowledging the unspoken concern. Smita is in vibrant yellows and reds, the kumkum on her forehead a blazing vermilion.

She is angry and taunts Vishwam later when he enters their room. ‘Did my father have only this house to send me to?’ A loaded question that speaks of how women are disposed of by feudal patriarchs. Rukmini continues: ‘I can’t bear to see such things. Take me to my mother’s house and leave me there for a while.’ She stands before the mirror while taking off her jewellery as she upbraids her husband. She glares angrily at him when he doesn’t say anything, turns her back to him in bed and slides closer to the wall. Rukmini has the option of going back to her mother. Where can Sushila go?

When Vishwam surreptitiously leaves the room, Rukmini is aware of where he is going. When he slinks back, Rukmini goes even closer to the wall, distancing herself further. ‘Proved your manhood? Had your heart’s fill?’ Angry sarcasm is followed by desperate reasoning. ‘Why do you have to become like your brothers? She is the mother of a child! Don’t you have me? Your brothers will put her in a brothel.’ A tongue lashing from an outraged wife who has hitherto been quiet. And submissive.

The rape survivor finds a strange bond with Vishwam who finally summons up courage to approach her and treats her with unexpected gentleness. His tenderness and hesitancy breach through Sushila’s apathy and she embraces him as her only link to humanity. One of the fascinating things about *Nishant* is the flux in which relationships are caught. Rukmini’s spontaneous sympathy for Sushila turns into hostility and settles into stoic resignation. Even acceptance of some sort. Small significant scenes mark this progression.

Rukmini is getting dressed, hurrying up Pochamma. As she goes down the stairs, in a rich sari and wearing more jewels than usual, the two women meet at the landing. They take a long hard look at each other. Sushila, now that she has won Vishwam over, starts being assertive. *Nishant* mirrors the subtle shifts of domestic power structure when Sushila gradually assumes the position of a mistress and demands to visit the temple in the family car. Rukmini just stops a few moments at the sewing machine. A turn of the head speaks of her awareness of the changed power equation, even as Pochamma mutters her incendiary two bits.

Sushila meets her husband at the temple encircled by the old wall and the stilted conversation breaks down before her tirade – her husband did nothing while she was a kept woman at the mercy of brutal men. His humiliation is so deep that he can’t even tell her of his futile attempts to rescue her. The pujari is witness to this shattering encounter and a strange bond grows between him and the teacher.

The outside world and the inside world are marked out spatially. The narrow staircase becomes a stage for silent confrontation between the hostile women. Sushila walks up, passes Vishwam, who enquires if

she went to the temple. She ignores him and continues up. Rukmini then follows, looks at him and then the woman who has gone past. Disgust shows in her accusing eyes even when she says nothing.

Sushila escalates her demands. She now wants her own kitchen because she is of a higher caste. Rukmini is at her sewing machine – is it her emotional crutch, occupational therapy of sorts – and ignores it for the time being. She later confronts Vishwam: 'You have given her a wife's status. Next you will make her mistress of the house. What of my status?' Vishwam, finding his voice, speaks up for Sushila's feelings. Finally, he accuses his wife: 'And you are worried about your status!' As the camera recedes, all Rukmini can do is gather her sari pallu and cry.

As the domestic drama plays out, the world outside is astir. The two men, one representing the educated middle-class and the other, the power of religion, band together to rouse the villagers to their oppression. Except for a scene that has a direct reference to Lord Krishna, we don't hear what the new conscience-rousers are saying. The swift, irreversible climax coincides with the temple car procession when no one turns up at the haveli to work. Not even the dependable Pochamma who cooks and tends to their needs.

Rukmini protests when asked to make tea but still goes to her chulah. Sushila comes in, bringing glasses and tins. She asks, what can I do? Rukmini counters: a woman needs to be told even this? Sushila is conciliatory. Go bathe, I will make tea, she offers. Truce has settled between the two women.

Rukmini is getting ready, to officially receive the procession from the temple. Sushila comes in with tea and tells her,'You are looking nice.' Ease has entered their relationship. Rukmini watches as the villagers come and start attacking Anant Nag. She stands holding the bars of the balcony in frozen horror, unheeding of Vishwam calling out to her to run out of the backdoor, as he and Sushila escape to the comparative safety of the rocky outcrop.

Anna is all dressed up in a formal dhoti and angavastram to offer obeisance to the deity outside the main door. The teacher attacks him just when he is about to receive the aarti plate. As if waiting for this spark, the crowd turns into a mob and pours into the haveli. Once anger is let loose and the mob unleashed, there is no safety. Not for innocent Rukmini who may be part of the feudal household but not part of their criminal misdeeds. Rukmini is the witness to a revolution unleashed by a feudal family's relentless tyranny and becomes its victim too. Her husband has been a passive aggressor and so she must pay the price. Revolutions need the blood of innocents.

We remember earlier scenes with mirrors. Sushila demands a larger mirror and Rukmini is often filmed against a big mirror in her

room, two images playing off against each other. Is she the more reflective of the two? A tantalizing question in a film that asks many more questions.

We see Rukmini lying sprawled, broken bangles by her bent arms, as if stretched out in supplication. The pujari covers her body with his ochre angavastram bearing the Ram Naam inscription all over. There is just a suggestion that Rukmini could be the victim of retaliatory sexual violence.

For Sushila, too, there is no escape. She is set to become a victim of double oppression, as you see the crowd, armed with sticks, reach the top of the rocks in a long shot. The teacher, bleeding profusely, clutching his blood-soaked shoulder, limps after the furious mob, trying desperately to save his wife. Cut to the pujari, sitting in shocked silence at the temple, as we glimpse the children inside – the only ones saved from carnage.

When change overtakes a moribund society, violence does not discriminate between the guilty and innocent. What happens to the fence-sitter? And what happens to the catalysts of revolution? Can the teacher and the pujari live with a clear conscience?

Nishant asks more questions than offers comforting answers. That gives the film its near epic quality. Ambiguity also subverts expectations of epic heroism. The central event of the film recalls the Ramayana parallel only to subvert it. There is no modern Ram because the battle is now against a co-opted judicial and legal system. The subversion is underlined by the performance of a bastardized Ramayana in the build-up to the temple festival. You see a painted Ram wearing dark shades and the rest of the cast taking a comic tumble to the guffaws of the rural audience.

This leads to another thought. Does Benegal suggest that making an ally of religion – be it the upholder (the pujari) or its crowd-pulling symbolic celebrations (the festival) – delegitimizes the revolutionary impulse? Revolution has the potential to become wayward, and adding religion to the mix might make it even more volatile. The Telangana movement came a few years after *Nishant*'s time frame. The Razakar uprising that came around the same time had communal overtones.

Nishant also signalled the unspoken yet inevitable rivalry between Smita and the equally talented Shabana Azmi. A new kind of screen chemistry was born and the three films in which they acted together crackled with the charged electricity of two great actors complementing each other even as they matched histrionic pace. Shabana's recollection of *Nishant*'s filming is sparing with details.'I don't have a clear memory of when I first met her but it was probably was during the making of *Nishant*. The unit had already arrived in

Hyderabad. We were shooting in a village near Hyderabad. I remember her as a fairly quiet kind of person. There was one scene that the two of us did together. She comes and tells me to eat. And that's the scene that stayed. Otherwise, we didn't have many scenes together.'

In *Nishant*, Smita had a secondary role but her presence leapt out of the screen as the humiliated wife who could still feel sympathy for her husband's unwilling mistress. Girish Karnad recalls being there when Shyam shot Smita doing tulsi puja. 'That was the moment I knew a star was born. She glowed.'* Vijay Tendulkar's script was based on a real-life incident and is seeded with all the social and psychological crosscurrents he is famous for weaving so dramatically into his plays and screenplays. The sado-masochistic relationship between captor and captive is gradually reversed, and the young neglected wife hints at an intuitive understanding that goes beyond the surface. The script weighed in Shabana Azmi's favour. And yet, one of the enduring images from Benegal's finely nuanced mise en scène is Smita's face highlighted against the shadowed background, as she sits at a sewing machine late into the night. The look of concentration on her face conveys suppressed anger and stoic resignation to the feudal ethos of the family which makes possessions of its women. Smita does not speak much after the initial scenes but her eloquence is stunning. It was as if Benegal knew that he had an actor who can say more with a look and subtle body language than any dialogue minted by a wordsmith. Here was an actor who set up her own dialogue with the camera.

Much later in 1981, Smita said: 'In every role there are situations in which I can imagine myself. The rest is a mystery, and I must preserve this mystery. It is the director's mystery, for him to unfold.' Viewers and other directors recognized her intuitive ability to convey this sense of mystery. Mrinal Sen observed, 'Suffering humiliation and fuming within – that was Smita Patil in her maiden appearance in Shyam Benegal's *Nishant*. It was an unforgettable portrayal of an oppressed woman in a feudal set-up and, indeed, an experience to watch. I was awed.'

Sen was not the only one who responded with awe. The screen lights up with Smita's presence to such incandescent effect that Krishna Basrur, the still cameraman, shot her almost to the exclusion of other actors who had longer roles. Benegal mentions this as does Mohan Agashe, who seems to be enjoying the other unscripted drama unfolding before the cast and crew. Hitendra Ghosh remembers the director admonishing the overenthusiastic Basrur to get out of the way as he went on taking Smita's pictures.

After *Nishant*, Smita became Benegal's first choice for *Manthan* and

Bhumika, completing a different kind of trilogy.

In an era when Bollywood tries to make a splash annually at Cannes, the most glamorous of film festivals, it is interesting to recount the experience of *Nishant*'s two leading women at the festival. Today, red carpet fashion disasters and occasional triumphs by our stars are dissected in minute detail by fashion vigilantes, the opinionated fashion police. The fact that our films are not making the selection cut for years now does not matter. It is all about crowing over or dissing our star presence at Cannes. It is a whole new publicity game now.

In contrast, *Nishant* was in competition at Cannes. NFDC had sent some posters which, not surprisingly, had not reached. As Shabana tells it: 'In a place where we had no money and everybody was throwing such lavish parties, Shyam came up with this unique idea. He said,"I want both of you to wear your best south Indian saris and walk the promenade from eight in the morning." So there we were, parading in our silk saris when everyone else was in beachwear! We were such a sight! When anyone looked at us, we'd grab them and say,"We have a screening at such and such a time, please come." We were our own walking ads and we got a handsome amount of people into the theatre. That was the only way Smita and I could attract attention. We had absolutely no money to promote the film.'

Anita adds a footnote to this. 'But where did Smita have those gorgeous south Indian silks? Shyam suggested that she go to his good friend Uma Da Cunha.' Uma is a critic, a pioneer of subtitling in India, film programmer and publicist among many other things. So it was in borrowed plumage from the ever obliging Uma that Smita strutted on the promenade.

A lesser-known Benegal–Smita Patil collaboration is the much underrated, not without reason, *Anugraham/Kondura* (1977), Benegal's only film in Telugu, shot simultaneously in Hindi with the same cast as *Kondura*. Was it because he had a producer from Andhra Pradesh, K. Venkatarama Reddy, that Benegal, with his screenplay collaborator Girish Karnad, transposed a complex, richly textured Marathi novel set in the Konkan, to the 'pure' Telugu-speaking land of coastal Andhra? Very unlike the mélange of charming dialects of his usual, Deccani-speaking Telangana setting seen in *Ankur*, *Nishant* and *Mandi*. Chintamani Khanolkar's novel explores the hold of superstition on a rural community through the psycho-sexual obsession of his Brahmin

protagonist. Brahminical mores and moral assumptions, the connect between sexuality and religious repression, are all under scrutiny.

Kondura tries to layer the narrative with tensions of sexual fantasies struggling against strictures of celibacy in the troubled psyche of Parasuram (Anant Nag). Parasuram is the idle younger brother married to Anasuya (Telugu superstar Vanisri), a quietly supportive wife who sees her husband being taunted by the older brother. At the end of his tether, Parasuram walks out of his village in a fit of anger, only to be confronted with the apparition of Kondura, the mythical sage from the sea, amidst crashing waves on the rocky coast. He is told he is to be moral guardian of his village and is given a dried, abortion-inducing root as a boon by this oracular sage. For the boon to be effective, Parasuram must strictly observe celibacy.

An almost euphoric Parasuram comes back and swears Anasuya to celibacy. The family, specially his widowed mother, watches in confusion. Soon, an invigorated Parasuram is convinced that the sage's message was to rebuild the temple falling to ruin. He seeks the help of the landowner Bhairavamurthy (Shekhar Chatterji) to renovate the temple. Gradually, after Parasuram gets a well dug with the help of the tribal water diviner, and claims that the Goddess appears to him, people start regarding him as a spiritual saviour.

Parasuram is plagued by the conflicting pulls of spiritual power and sexual frustration. Anasuya appears to him as the apparition of the Goddess and he is overcome by the guilt of blasphemy. Parvati (Smita Patil), the wife of Bhairavamurthy's nephew Vasu, haunts his dreams as a tempting seductress. Bhairavamurthy has his own agenda. He is a womanizer, rumoured not to have spared even his younger brother's wife. That couple is dead, leaving behind a physically handicapped son Vasu who is at the receiving end of constant humiliation. When Parvati becomes pregnant and Bhairavamurthy's wife (Sulabha Deshpande) is happy that there will be an heir at last, Bhairavamurthy cunningly manages to spread the rumour that she is carrying his child, not her husband's. This is the sin Parasuram has been warned to beware of. He forces a reluctant Anasuya to give the juice of the root to an unsuspecting Parvati during her seemantham (godh bharai) ceremony.

Ironically, the boon does not work. Parasuram realizes that Bhairavamurthy has conned him. Distraught, he tries to invoke the Goddess again but when he fails, he breaks the vow of celibacy and forces Anasuya to have sex – whether as atonement, punishment or fulfilment of his suppressed carnality, is left ambiguous. A disillusioned Parasuram sees the futility of all he has tried to achieve when Anasuya, feeling defiled, jumps into the well. The only rational person in the village, the school master Ramanayya (Satyadev Dubey),

comprehends the tragedy of what is happening.

Kondura is a flawed film; the intent is clear enough but it cannot achieve the complexity of the novel. Benegal does not try to replicate the novel's subtext, urging the reader to question the protagonist's version of his personal reality. Instead, he mines the sensuousness underlying the rhythms of simple, everyday actions – like the woman serving food to the man seated on the floor, her sari tucked up to reveal tantalizing glimpses of her smooth calves as she moves with unhurried grace. Smita's stunning sensuousness as the young, unconsciously provocative daughter-in-law casts a spell over the confused Brahmin celibate. Vanisri is austerely simple, dark and unadorned – except when she is transformed into a wrathful Goddess, forbidding in her demeanour.

Benegal and Govind Nihalani, the cinematographer, bring a lot of thought to the way they present Smita as the alternative female principle. Hers is a less complex role. She represents a simple, unselfconscious earthiness. Her first appearance is in long shot, as she is framed in a decorated cart, all dressed up in feudal finery. Next time, we see her feet adorned with toe rings, and then the camera slides up her half-revealed calf, while her bright yellow sari is tucked in at the waist and she is bent, her hand pouring ghee onto the laden plate before the Brahmin guest. She straightens from her bent posture and we see her face, hair ornaments framing a dusky face adorned with a big red bindi. An image of Annapurna, but one who looks sensuous to the frustrated Parasuram as she demurely retreats.

The scene can also be read as an oblique tribute to one of the most famous tropes of Hindi cinema – V.K. Murthy's camera gliding up from Chhoti Bahu's alta-decorated feet, up the rich folds of her silken sari, over a bejewelled neck to rest on her face. The film of course is *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* and V.K. Murthy is Govind Nihalani's guru. This is one of those teasers that lodges itself in the mind of a critic – an occupational hazard of sorts.

In *Kondura*, Parvati, the demure daughter-in-law, rumoured to be from a poor family, becomes an assertive wife when Bhairavamurthy thrashes a helpless Vasu. Quietly but surely, she puts an end to this brutality. Within the narrow graph offered by the narrative, Smita makes the impact intrinsic to her screen presence. Her dark, earthy beauty is dramatically enhanced by the rich, traditional attire. She embodies the subtle, often suppressed eroticism bursting through the constraints of a traditional, seemingly puritanical society.

The recurring image of Smita in the film is Parasuram's fantasy – she lies on the ground, bare shouldered in a red sari, her arms stretched out in invitation. But in reality, she is a simple young woman who finds the strength to shield her husband from abuse. She

builds a friendly relationship with Anasuya; shared feminine gestures like putting flowers in each other's hair at the seemantham ceremony convey the easy intimacy women seek and find so naturally. Parvati survives all the machinations and has a healthy baby while Anasuya is the victim of her husband's obsession. She pays the price of his guilt.

Smita is credited with art direction, along with Neera Benegal, for *Kondura*. Shyam Benegal explains how this happened:'Neera was the costume designer for *Kondura*. I did not have a regular costume designer. Neera would come to the sets of *Ankur* and *Nishant*. For *Manthan* of course I had Shama Zaidi but Shama was busy with her husband Sathyu's film at the time of *Kondura*, that's why Neera came. After Neera left, for the rest of the film, Smita took over to deal with the costumes, art etc. Smita had natural good taste. Some people have that, a sense of balance and colour, particularly with textiles. If you have seen the films she has done for me, you'd notice that combined with Shama, she had innate good taste for textiles, fabrics … you could see from the way she clothed herself. Not when she was in jeans of course.'

Benegal shares little-known incidents from the making of *Kondura*. Being the perfectionist he is about nuances of dialect, he had to give up sync sound for the Telugu version. He has been an adherent to sync sound from the very beginning.

'Smita had to be dubbed for *Anugraham*. Telugu was not a language she had grown up listening to. She had to act with Vanisri, a big star of Telugu films who was known for her articulation of the language … like the mega stars of Telugu industry, NTR and Nageshwar Rao. She had acted opposite them in many films. So Vanisri was like a Meena Kumari figure.

Smita was also functioning as my assistant in the film. Beyond art and costume, as a direction assistant too. So Smita had a trace of nervousness acting with Vanisri. Strangely, for some reason, Vanisri was overwrought and felt that she was not doing anything right. She had a nervous breakdown on the sets. Then her brother-in-law came. I told her she could go away for a while if she wanted to … I had to get hold of a psychiatrist from Madras. We were shooting near Visakhapatnam.

'He diagnosed her. You know that she was obsessed in the film. What happened was that Anant Nag became the object of her obsession during the shooting. It was incredible. For instance, in the middle of the night, Anant came running from his room to mine. He didn't want to go back. "She comes knocking at my door at all times of the night!" he would tell me. Vanisri was very vulnerable at that time as a human being. She was a top actress but somewhat insecure then.

'At every railway crossing when we were going to location, there would be huge crowds waiting to see her. It was only when she gave her darshan that was she allowed to go. I must say this about the Telugu public – they are more cinema crazy than any other community, at least in India. At the location, there was a full mela. Dosawala, coffee wala, chana wala … but when I said we are shooting now, so sit there quietly. They would do that, not a choo out of them. It doesn't happen anywhere else in India. They are very disciplined, they know what's going on.

'Smita was very, very good at that time with Vanisri. She was really helpful in dealing with her, because it was difficult. She had gone berserk. She'd start crying; so we had to have a doctor at hand all the time, all sorts of things were going on. That's when I saw Smita's strength. Not just coping with and being supportive of a nervous fellow actor, but also lip synching to a language she was not familiar with. It was in the Hindi version that Smita spoke her own lines.'

Perhaps this helps explain why *Kondura/Anugraham* is a flawed film. It's an ambitious bilingual that could not fully realize the central theme, with a metaphor that was stretched too long and thin.

Under the Shadow of Starkness

Smita was cast in *Gaman* (1978), the first film of Muzaffar Ali, ad man, reclusive aristocrat, painter and fashion designer. It was drenched in the muted colours of melancholy, detailing the hopeless despair of a poor, uneducated, young Muslim man, Ghulam Hasan (Farooque Sheikh) who gets married to the lovely Khairunnisa (Smita Patil) and comes to Bombay. He ekes out a livelihood as a cab driver on Bombay's heartless streets, far away from his village in Uttar Pradesh and wrenched by longing for his new bride. In the village, he had been idling, having given up studies and trusting the goodwill of the big landowner who insisted on his dues. Lallu (Jalal Agha), an old pal on a home visit, encourages him to go to Bombay and make something of himself. Ghulam is lonely even though the UP migrant biradari is helpful without making Hindu/Muslim distinctions. He graduates to driving the kindly, older cabbie's taxi but still, it is hand-to-mouth existence with no money to send home even when his old mother is bedridden after a fall.

Smita's Khairunnisa is a sensitive portrait of loneliness and wordless waiting. Her wonderful bone structure is highlighted by the stark simplicity of the black she often wears. Starkness haunts her like a shadow, as she goes silently about her chores in the whitewashed courtyard, pining for her absent husband. The fact that this is a Muslim couple in a predominantly Hindu village underlines their

isolation. The geography of the village sets the two women apart – the new bride and her elderly mother- in-law. Meanwhile, Bombay's uncaring crowds – all picture-postcard garishness and swirling movement – strand a hopelessly homesick young man in his own angst. Some images of Smita from *Gaman* are evocative of an Amrita Sher-Gil painting.

What is striking is Smita's body language. She inhabits the village woman, internally and externally, be it crouching in the kitchen or grinding flour on the chakki. The way she lights the chulah with straw and makes tea while bundled up in a black shawl has the homely familiarity of chores done day after day. The few tender moments between the newlyweds light up the dark interiors. As she lights his beedi, Khairu reprimands him into getting up because his mother keeps nagging.

Still moments, her busy fingers making stitches on the quilt, alternate with her quick movements in the yard, letting the hens run free instead of being cooped up. There is no make-up to cover the blemishes on her forehead and cheeks. An inner beauty illuminates her face.

Then there is her voice. Ghulam gets a letter in Bombay bearing bad news. Suppressed fear and longing in that voiceover drive him deeper into a morass of helplessness. Her quiet despair etches the melancholia of '*Aap ki yaad aati rahi raat bhar*' (the mournful song won Chhaya Ganguli the National Award for Best Female Singer) while she is pressing her mother-in-law's feet, putting out the chulah's fire, walking about the empty space of that lonely house, clutching his letter to alleviate her loneliness, eyes vacant, living in a space where even memories seem to have been exhausted. Two poignancies hit us – his aloneness in a crowd and her physical aloneness in a home that is empty. Muzaffar Ali and his actors create such sad poetry of quiet fortitude that it haunts us long after the film is over.

Padmanabhan, Paddy to his industry associates, something of a cult figure as a sound recordist to parallel cinema directors, recalls how quickly Smita picked up the local accent, as did Jalal Agha, while Farooque Sheikh had problems with it. *Gaman* was shot on location in Kotwara within twenty days. The unit lived in Muzaffar Ali's palace. 'I was the last person to come on board,' says Paddy. Smita was an easy-going person, walking around the location where there was not much to see, but she liked to get a feel of the place. The director wanted Paddy to record her laughter for five minutes but Smita was finding it difficult. 'I gave her my headphone, plugged it in and asked her to hear herself. She said it was difficult to laugh hearing her own voice but soon she burst out laughing and I recorded it for five minutes.' Paddy is not sure if Muzaffar Ali used it in the film but he remembers

it as an instance of Smita's professionalism and the determination to get things right. In an interview to *Bombay Times*, 4 August 2015, Muzaffar Ali recalls working with Smita. 'Smita was a dream to work with. Like me, she was a Libran and we were very similar. She could see the aesthetics in everything one was trying to do, and she would respond to a lot of things that normally people don't respond to, like music, people, clothes, dialogues. We had great fun together. Asha Bhosle's daughter was her companion and the whole night, we would sit on the terrace in Kotwara and laugh, and people would think some bhoot had come.' He goes on to talk of the difference between Smita and Rekha whom he immortalized as Umrao Jaan. 'She's also a Libran but just the opposite of Smita. While Smita surrendered more, Rekha was more reserved. Smita was more stimulating as a muse. She had a different kind of imagination.'

The year 1978 also saw Smita play a secondary role in Ramdas Phutane's Marathi film *Sarvasakshi*. The producer of *Samna*turned director to recreate the ethos of rural Maharashtra and examine what led to the horrific practice of ritual child murders. At that time, the nation was aghast by the exposé of the Manvat murders, as it came to be known, when, at the behest of a Tantrik, children were slaughtered by superstitious followers. A young couple – Ravi, a teacher, and his wife Rekha – are welcomed by the leading landowner of the village and his daughter-in-law Sujatha (Smita Patil). Sujatha and her young son stay in the village while her husband, who is a pilot, is posted in Delhi. You hear her unmistakable voice calling out to her son before she appears in a long shot. She is dressed in flowing printed silk saris and the way she carries herself suggests that she is city bred.

Smita had completed her most demanding, most accomplished film *Bhumika* a year earlier. Yet she was prepared to play a much smaller role, that too the mother of a child when she was barely twenty-three. In an industry known for vanity, it is quite remarkable that she chose to play an older woman who is not the main lead.

Smita, the cultured hostess of the wealthiest house in the village, exudes warmth as she makes the newcomer Rekha feel at home. She misses her husband but doesn't parade her loneliness. When a letter comes bearing the news of her husband's death, the camera closes in – her shocked face and pain-filled eyes wordlessly convey her grief. Her inner desolation, while mutely listening to the laudatory speeches of condolence being made outside in the courtyard, is conveyed through

instinctive body language. She draws her body in, trying to find strength to bear tearing grief.

Smita fades out from the film as the evil Bhagat plots and schemes to counter Ravi's modern opinions. The narrative unravels Ravi's ambiguous self-doubt in his own rationality after the eerie, chilling events. The memory of Sujatha's warmth remains even as the story reaches its ambivalent end.

*Interview, *Murtimant Asmita,* Lalita Tamhane's audio-visual show

4

Smita Patil and Her Dasavatars

An actor has many facets. It is for film-makers to discover and create roles to highlight these complementary facets reflected through subtleties of performance. An actor's created experience translates into the viewer's experiential reality.

The parameters of an actor's ability vary with genres and film-makers' sensibilities. Of course, there are audience expectations given the track record. We value versatility. Intensity singes us. Screen presence leaves us mesmerized. Variety is tangible; essence is elusive. If an actor can give us ten memorable characters in the span of eleven working years, even if the films are not evenly balanced in terms of cinematic quality, what do we call this achievement?

I find the Indian concept of 'Dasavatar' illuminating in interpreting the range and depth of Smita's performances in films as apart in theme and treatment as *Jait Re Jait* and *Akaler Sandhane*, or the character graph drawn in the screen time of *Bhumika* and *Bazaar*, to mention just four of her films explored in this chapter. An avatar is the manifestation of one super persona, highlighting one particular attribute embedded in that personality. In mythology, it is a combination of an evolutionary process that also reflects the particular ethos and problems of that age. It is tempting to read Smita as Durga/Kali if we pursue the mythology metaphor, but that is stretching it too far. It is also constricting, because it forces a template on her, to conform to this given image and only play out variations. In Indian cinema, it is far too easy to invoke mythological associations – like a ready reckoner for easy references – in superficial and obvious ways.

Examples are so prolific and routine that they need no elaboration. What enriches a narrative is subtle evocation of such associations that resonate with a viewer who can see the screen image and its many connotations, both said and unsaid. Kumar Shahani assiduously creates such resonances in *Tarang* as does Shyam Benegal in *Bhumika*. To achieve this, you need an actor who has tremendous screen presence. She must be a paradox, a repository for contrary combinations – a sponge that absorbs her ethos, and a mirror that refracts and then reflects what has been absorbed internally. Smita has this rare ability. That's where this metaphor comes from, that of a core personality and its charismatic gift of transformation into memorable avatars.

Ambiguity is often an ambitious director's goal. The vehicle to convey the complex of ambiguities that shroud human feelings is the actor. There is a curious contradiction here. Film demands a degree of transparency from the actor to pierce the opacity of ambiguity. Smita showed this inborn talent for transparency and she also learnt the art of disguising the depth of emotion. The flicker of a fleeting emotion, a slight tightening of the face and the nakedness of her eyes would all add up to deliver a range of feelings.

This raises another question. Was Smita an unacknowledged genius? What is genius really? There are as many definitions as there are writers on this subject. I found interesting observations in Lois Banner's *Marilyn, the Passion and the Paradox*. Banner, who espouses what she terms'the geography of gender', examines new concepts of writers on genius who argue that it can appear at any point in life, not just in childhood as the romantic concept of yore held.

She quotes from the study by Daniel Coyle and Michael J.A. Howe who distance themselves from the nineteenth-century romantic belief of exclusivity. They find three factors key to what they see as a more general phenomenon:'First is a grandiose and mystical sense of the world. The second element of genius is an ability to concentrate obsessively on a goal and to strive for perfection in reaching it. The third element is a resonance to one's historical era, being in sync with current ideals, living when one's gift or invention can be appreciated.' This description of genius at work strips away the mystic halo and enables us to see this demystified yet unquantifiable attribute at work around us in so many fields.

The last two elements quoted in the above passage are relevant to Smita. Every director who has worked with her commends her ability to work hard. Shyam Benegal is eloquent about Smita's capacity for empathy, a crucial factor in casting her. Empathy is not just the actor's intuitive ability to internalize the character she is playing to bring forth all its facets. In great actors, it seems infectious; the viewer's

empathy is roused to feel with and for the character. Whether Smita concentrated obsessively to the exclusion of everything else is something we will never know. But striving for perfection is visible in every film she did, once she had discovered that acting was her vocation. As for resonating with the times she lived in and being in sync with current ideals, this is so obviously true of the work Smita did all her life – from her childhood association with the progressive ideas of the Rashtra Seva Dal to the kind of path- breaking roles she chose to play, defying received wisdom of the day. To quote just one example – she played a venereal disease– ridden old devadasi in *Giddh*, a brave film that was never released. This was after she had won two National Awards.

Her commitment to hard work encompassed not merely understanding the role she had to play but also adapting herself to satisfy a demanding director. Shyam Benegal chuckled when he read the introduction to this book. Husky laughter? he questioned, before elaborating a little-known fact. Smita had the annoying habit of laughing in a squeaky schoolgirlish way when excited, 'a very Marathi mannerism', as he summed up. 'Are you in the eighth standard with a bunch of giggly girls given to high-pitched squeals?' That's how he remembers admonishing his prized protégé when grooming her for *Bhumika*, a film he was determined to make though it was left to gestate for long. 'Speak from the chest' was the constant reminder and Smita consciously got rid of the occasional shrill tone. She was never out of pitch after that and made her full-bodied voice an intrinsic part of her screen signature.

Critics have sometimes accused Smita of reprising the strong, earthy woman into its many variations while acknowledging the intensity she invests even in unworthy roles. It is as if there is an undeclared battle that pits intensity against versatility. Time to bring on the big guns.

Patricia Bosworth's formidable tome, *Jane Fonda: The Private Life of a Public Woman*, makes for riveting reading. She recalls how Lee Strasberg, the much sought-after guru of the Actors Studio, laid down his rules. Versatility did not matter as much as intensity.'He kept repeating that tension was the occupational hazard of the actor. He emphasized the actor's individuality and the exploration of that individuality. He did not place a high value on versatility; instead, he stressed penetrating the talent. The artist's courage lies in his or her ability to plunge into these recesses and confront his or her most secret self.'

Smita was not a Method actor. She followed her instinct and acted from the gut, putting herself entirely in the director's hands. Her greatest asset was her intensity. Intensity became her. Intensity

defined her. Her passion for her calling makes her enter the recesses of the character she is portraying. She has this ability to convince you of the truth of the person and make you feel the emotions she is going through, even in films that are not worthy of her talent. Like so many of the mainstream melodramas she chose to do in the 1980s.

The person you see on the screen is the result of the director's vision, cinematography's alchemy, the editor's incisive craft and the mood evoked by the background score, be it music or silence. But what we remember is the actor – the infinite changes of emotion in the eyes and face, the gesture the camera captures, the chemistry with the other actors. The actor encapsulates all the work that has gone into creating a telling close-up, the feeling that comes through the words written by others, the shifting choreography of body language. A good actor is consistent. A great actor breaks the barrier of craft and touches you with permanence, long after the film has become a part of our memory pool.

Arun Khopkar, ever the insightful student of cinema and its aesthetics, is incisive when he talks of Method. 'In method acting what happens is, you work out so fully that you leave out suggestion. And the greatest acting is suggestion. So that there is space left for the audience to enter and interact with the actor because she hasn't worked it out so fully.' Khopkar goes into the nitty-gritty of an actor's preparation. 'Another problem with method acting is … I work out a scene, the gestures, for a particular lens with a particular background, with a particular kind of lighting, you must move at a certain speed. Sometimes it could be less than realistic speed, sometimes I must move a little faster. So this fine tuning is something that great actors do to overcome their method.' He rounds off with a famous quote. Brando had once said, 'Sometimes an actor gets this immense urge to act. My advice is, wait. It will pass.' Even at her most awkward in some of the commercial films Smita chose to do, she avoided being 'actorly'. The intensity might waver but she did not lapse into a wooden method that she had never trained in.

Amol Palekar, film-maker, actor, theatre personality and painter, acted with Smita in just two films but he analyses with deliberation Smita's unique gift – intensity. 'Smita was a wonderfully instinctive actor.' He goes on to add that he worked with many trained actors but he finds that it is instinct that makes them good, not so much the training. 'With Smita, her instincts were tremendous and the way she could bring out the intensity and convey it to the camera was absolutely amazing. Once she decided to take up something, she went about it in a very methodical, very studious way. She was a strong person from within. All her vulnerability, all her apprehensions, she used to carry with her. Yet, she was very determined and extremely

strong. So this combination of vulnerable and strong was really fascinating. It came through in her films. In fact, I would go a step further and say, I haven't seen an actor in the Indian scenario who could bring out intensity so beautifully and so strongly without uttering a single word. One could only fall in love with those portrayals.'

Falling in love with her on screen was something you could not be immune to. An actor's graph touches peaks of great performances rising over the flat lines of competence that are the norm. There are more peaks in Smita's extraordinary career than any comparable figure of that time. We see her being voracious sometimes in the way she inhabits a character. As if her appetite for experience is insatiable.

Actors are often compared to chameleons, for their ability to take on different screen personae and breathe life into a screenplay, and fructify a director's vision. The unspoken and often unflattering implication of this comparison is a lack of sincerity.

With Smita, sincerity is her hallmark. You see it in the spine of her upright body, the naked clarity of her eyes – truly windows to her soul – and all this combined with hints of unplumbed depths. It is as if you know her, almost intimately, and yet, a lot remains hidden to tease us, imparting a thirst to know this passionate being holding us spellbound…

Now for the ten films, Smita's Dasavatars, that justify her unassailable position as a great actor.

Most of the films select themselves, not just for showcasing Smita at her best but also as landmarks – minor and major – of Indian cinema. The surprise inclusions would be *Bazaar* and *Akhir Kyon*. *Bazaar* because the film-making is dated but the issues are still relevant and Smita's performance in a role with negative connotations is admirably honest. *Aakhir Kyon* reveals how she could so effortlessly dominate a narrative that adheres to commercial cinema's concept of a 'woman's film' complete with all its clichés, even if they are progressive. If you make a musical analogy, *Bhumika, Chakra, Umbartha, Tarang, Jait Re Jait, Manthan* are ghana ragas, while the others are in a minor key, and yet, important in their unique way.

The films outlined here are in chronological order of the year in which they were censored.

MANTHAN *(1976): Surviving the Social Churning*

Manthan is the best example of how Benegal uses'developmental aesthetic' (Madhava Prasad's rather belittling definition) to go beyond the parameters imposed on it by Marxist analysis. The thrust of this argument is that Benegal is compelled to place feudalism in the past to engage the viewer's sympathy – as in *Ankur* and *Nishant* – for

palatable denouement of the conflict the stories explore, even as the context of *Manthan* makes it necessary to be contemporaneous. Prasad examines *Manthan*as 'an Emergency film', a film about the transformative power of a mobilized bureaucracy. It can be read in this limited way if you shut out the human drama that Benegal's craft weaves into a dramatic script. Otherwise, the barebones story of the hurdles in setting up a milk cooperative in a hostile environment could well have ended up as dry as a Films Division documentary. One of the main elements that enriches the film is the bitter- sweet eroticism that runs through the narrative to the haunting theme song, '*Mhaaro gaam kaatha parey, jaha doodh ke nadiya baahe, koyal koh koh gaye, mhare ghar angna na bhoolona*'. The lyrics change from hopeful to yearning to sad, to mirror the emotions that Bindu (Smita Patil) experiences in the course of a relationship that goes nowhere given Dr Rao's inhibitions and Bindu's situation, of a Dalit woman trapped in an abusive marriage. *Manthan* adds yet another dimension to Benegal's theme of sexual attraction that transgresses marital conventions. All his central couples in this trilogy are married to someone else but most succumb to the attraction for a variety of motives. As happens in the best of Benegal's films, sexual politics gets fused with the wider political struggle and each reinforces the other.

The plot follows a group of city specialists, led by the veterinarian Dr Manohar Rao (Girish Karnad) to Sanganva, a village near Rajkot. The largely Dalit population sells its milk to the private dairy of the wily Mishraji (Amrish Puri) and the remuneration is hardly fair. Rao starts collecting milk samples from the village and meets the hostile glare and lashing tongue of the feisty Bindu when he enters the Dalit basti. You first see Bindu's back, covered in a red bandhni odhni as she finishes milking her buffalo and goes inside. Her toddler son is by the door, crying, as she angrily rejects Rao's request for a little milk. *Bachche kum karne wala aaya tha, ab tum*? She equates him with preachy, interfering family planning workers, her rant a mix of scorn and anger.

The persistent Rao scoops a little milk into his sample bottle, keeps some money at the door and leaves. She follows him determinedly, loudly calling him a thief and draws the attention of the surly, ever-scowling, suspicious Bhola (a brilliant Naseeruddin Shah who ignites the screen). Rao ignores them and walks off.

Gradually, Rao tries to explain to the villagers the benefits of forming a cooperative where they are all stakeholders and are paid by the fat content of the milk and not quantity, as Mishra does. They are still sceptical because this sisoti (the local dialect is delightfully authentic) doesn't give loans like Mishra does. Dr Rao's efforts to ingratiate himself with the community achieves a breakthrough when

he attends to a sick child and gives an injection against the objection of his more conservative colleague, Deshmukh (Mohan Agashe). Grudgingly, yet gradually, they are won over.

Benegal uses the screening of a real documentary that drones on in the usual boring fashion to the villagers, to subtly suggest how different his narrative is. The documentary is about cattle breeding methods, the process of artificial insemination, the equality promised to all strata of rural society irrespective of caste, creed and gender. The meeting is disrupted by stone throwing and Bhola becomes an automatic suspect. This documentary-within-film highlights the essential difference between an engaging drama with people you can identify with and the usual informative tract that reels out facts in an impersonal fashion. The subject of breeding with its scientific attitude to sex underlines the simmering emotions that ignite between two couples – the heedless young assistant Chandavarkar's affair (Anant Nag, mostly in a red shirt so that his presence can't go unnoticed) with a pliant Dalit girl, and the unspoken attraction between Bindu and the good doctor.

Chandavarkar's affair makes the villagers distrustful all over again. The erring colleague is sent back but the girl is whipped and chained for her indiscretion. This reinforces Bhola's distrust of all city folk. Years earlier, a city contractor had left his widowed mother pregnant and gone his selfish way.

Yet, it is Bhola and Bindu who become Rao's core supporters. Bindu because she finds herself attracted to this man who treats her as an equal and is consistently friendly. When he asks Bindu about her husband, her whiplash answer is edged with contempt: 'Must be lying drunk somewhere.' She is brusque, yet underneath, she is vulnerable to his overtures.

She locks eyes with Rao even when there is a crowd around them and he is asking the Dalits to join the society.'I will if you ask me', with a subtly suggestive look that is tentative but conveys her interest. There is a little enigmatic smile around her lips. Smita looks stunning, with her kohl-lined eyes, a small tattoo on her chin and a red odhni framing her compelling face. Her sharp white teeth holding the corner of her odhni is her signature look.

The scene that builds up their mutual attraction begins on a prosaic enough note. She is walking briskly along fields, trying to find her buffalo. Rao joins her and engages in light banter about the wandering propensities of her buffalo. He walks beside her, she slips and he catches her briefly, to break her fall. This leads to an intense exchange of looks and soon, she is sitting by the gushing tap, scrubbing her leg with a stone. Her skirt is hiked up to her knee. She is seemingly unselfconscious but the latent chemistry crackles as Rao's

eyes stray to her leg. She doesn't look away, and gives him an intense stare. 'Do you have kids?' she asks and when he says no, follows up with,'Aren't you married?' When he nods yes, she persists, 'Is your wife beautiful?' It is Rao who turns evasive, and turns the talk to the straying buffalo. Bindu is curtly dismissive.'You can go, sahib. It will come back.'

A scene loaded with sexual frisson. It reveals how the man is discomfited by this unforeseen attraction and she is open, sending out a subtle message. The attraction gets stronger and the words of '*Mhaaro gaam*' now express wistful longing. She is not a village innocent, of the trusting gaon ki chhori variety. She is a strong woman who knows what she feels. The tragedy is that with Rao's city-bred wife Shanta joining him, he pretends the attraction never existed.

One telling sequence conveys what words can't. Shanta is bored and dislikes her husband's constant championing of Dalits, encouraging them to stand for election against the high-caste sarpanch. She is mostly seen lying in bed, listening to film songs on the radio. All Rao can do to conciliate her is to make love. The image of their faces close together cuts to the hiss of fire being put out. Bindu, squatting on the floor, puts out the embers of her chulah with a pensive, thoughtful look on her face. She smooths the bed clothes on the ground, goes to the door and shuts it while her husband is in the outer room, smoking a beedi. Soon, he opens the door, approaches a sleeping Bindu and touches her back. She jerks up, retreats further and spits out, 'Don't touch me!' The husband sneers, 'Don't think I don't know why you won't let me touch you.' Clutching the crying child who has woken up, Bindu hears his abusive tirade:'You are a slut, ready when your lover comes sniffing!' With the child held tight against her, Bindu runs across the room, fear and revulsion on her face. 'Don't touch me! Or I will jump into the well,' she threatens, swearing upon her child. She slides down the wall in despair, panting, leans against it for support, her helplessness frozen in that image.

That is Bindu's tragedy. She can deny her husband physical intimacy but is trapped in a marriage to a drunken wastrel who retaliates by poisoning her buffalo. She is wordless, desolate as, hand to her forehead, she sees the dead animal. There is a certain dignity in her grief, as she turns her face aside, quietly sobbing. She faces the double oppression of a Dalit woman – caste and patriarchy. Even a drunken wastrel can lay down the law, making her put her thumb impression on a piece of paper that Mishra holds out, in lieu of an interest-free loan, once their basti has been burnt down. The paper is a charge of rape against Rao, to blackmail him into shutting down the cooperative that has eroded the hold of Mishra and the sarpanch over the villagers.

A humiliated sarpanch joins forces with Mishra and the two plot to subvert the burgeoning cooperative in every way they can, from delaying the trucks carrying milk to the town and thus curdling it, to burning down Dalit huts. Mishra uses this opportunity to shower the displaced with gifts and money and win back their wavering loyalty.

Caste hierarchy of feudalism allied with capitalism blocks equitable development. This socio-economic truth that underwrites political power comes out through the dramatic narrative that escalates into premeditated violence against the newly assertive Dalits. It is the aftermath that makes *Manthan*such a landmark film not only in Benegal's oeuvre but Indian cinema as well.

The sarpanch, nursing his grudge against Rao for encouraging a Dalit candidate to stand against him, manipulates his transfer out of the village. But the seeds sown by the external catalyst bear fruit. Now, a local, the fiery Bhola, grows into an organic leader of change.

The script by Vijay Tendulkar, based on the experiences of the pioneer of the White Revolution, Dr Verghese Kurien, was subject to rewriting and improvisation while shooting on location by Girish Karnad and Benegal. What is most intriguing is Dr Rao's character. He is, on one hand, progressive, wanting to change the lives of the underprivileged and get them their due. On the other hand, he is also stricken by a strange inertia brought on perhaps by an unconscious feeling of his own superiority. A catalyst can't act from a perch of perceived superiority. This ambivalence makes him a far more interesting person than the bureaucrat-with-a-mission template it could well have been.

Manthan drives home the point that interaction between the educated city professional and the village community can work only if there is no assumption of superiority. A patronizing attitude will only set up new walls of distrust. Once distrust is breached, the so-called 'uneducated' is willing to learn and adapt modern technology, for self-interest, if nothing else. When this awareness comes, the canny among them will use the caste card for electoral advantage in a democracy. The churning – mythical, social and psychological – is a process that can't be stopped once it is set in motion.

Manthan's images and the title song are evergreen and used to this day. Amidst the blitzkrieg of glossy TV ads that blind our colour-bedazzled eyes and numb our assaulted minds, comes the lilting folk song to gently nudge us out of the stupor caused by undiscriminating satiety. Smita's mesmerizing eyes stare out of her strikingly angular face and soon, there are village women carrying pots of milk, striding confidently towards burgeoning independence. The Amul story of path-breaking success is meshed with scenes from *Manthan*, and the felicitous melding of content and form is a gentle reminder of a master

communicator's best work. *Manthan* had worked as an inspirational film and is now part of an imaginative ad that speaks to a contemporary audience. To the familiar lexicon of Utterly Butterly Amul and Taste of India is added Smita's smouldering gaze under the red bandhni odhni.

Smita's role is not that of a conventional heroine. Yet, the poignancy of her plight and the strength at the core of her being come through vibrantly. Even after so many years, accolades come her way from a newer generation of critics. In a critique of *Manthan* in the *Hindu* (13 September 2012), Ziya Us Salam writes: 'As a woman fiercely protective of her space, Smita Patil comes across as an artiste with a thousand expressions.'

Benegal shot the film on location near Rajkot. He recalls that a big group of people came from Rajkot city to see the Bombay stars shooting in the village. They were curious to see the female star. They could not recognize Smita sitting with the other women – some of them local – against a wall.

Benegal had to make a departure from his usual practice of sync sound. Hitendra Ghosh says that because of the dialect, they had to dub it later in the studio. There was a dialogue coach, an expert in the local dialect, but they could not take the risk of sync sound. Interestingly and ironically, this was Tendulkar's only National Award for script even though he was not present when it was drastically improvised on location.

Manthan is a much-travelled film. Apart from the conventional cinema audiences, the film was shown on Super 8, in villages. It's been used as a debating point with people in villages by the spearhead teams. It has also been used at international seminars, at a UN Development Conference, for instance. It is also the first film in the world to be produced not by a single production house, but by the farmers of the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Federation who contributed two rupees each for its production.

In an interview with Smita, veteran journalist Piroj Wadia asked her how she felt about *Manthan*'s entry for the Oscars. Her face glowing, she said: 'Fantastic! Don't know what to say. It's the best movie Shyam's made and it could represent the Indian audience's liking.' The interview records further that in the beginning, they weren't too sure of its success, it was a totally different film from the rest; a very dry subject, no entertainment and not many people would be interested in seeing a film on the setting up of a milk farmers' cooperative. 'But it's been handled well and it's doing well, surprisingly,' said a smiling Smita.

JAIT RE JAIT *(1977): The Drums of Desire*

The rope of my shyness
has snapped,
my mind's boat is caught
in the whirlpool of contemplation
of his lovely limbs.

—Bihari, seventeenth-century Hindi poet,
The Satasai of Bihari (Penguin Classics)

These lines from a lesser-known poet succinctly describe the central image of Chindi's passionate gaze, her frank confession of longing and desire. Indian cinema has really not seen a woman like Chindi. And no one but Smita Patil could have played this role and owned it so fully. So musically.

Jait Re Jait is such a memorable melding of music and lyricism – not just in the words of the unforgettable songs but in its essence that pervades the story, images, content and performances. Jabbar Patel, fresh from the triumph of *Ghashiram*and *Samna*, creates the first truly musical film of Indian cinema. That the essence of a musical form has eluded our film-makers for long is intriguing considering that our films have so many songs for every conceivable and inconceivable occasion and mood – imposed on the narrative for a host of untenable reasons.

Jabbar infuses the stark realism of the story and its authentic location with musicality that throbs and pulsates under the simple lives of the Thakars, a scheduled Adivasi tribe of Maharashtra with its own distinct culture. He brings theatre's Brechtian device of alienation to create yet another layer in a film that works at many levels – a passionate love story that ends in tragedy, where myths are a lived experience, not a homogenizing, Sanskritized (often also sanitized) exercise that is overt. *Jait Re Jait* is simple and magical, direct and suggestive.

The story of its making is intriguing. The Mangeshkars, the whole clan, invited Jabbar Patel to make a film on his own terms. He had read the novel *Thakurwadi* by G.N. Dandekar and decided to base his film on a story set in a Thakar village. He asked the eminent playwright Satish Alekar to adapt it for film. He immediately thought of Smita for the role of Chindi and took her to Prabhu Kunj, and the Mangeshkars accepted his choice without a question. Usha Mangeshkar was the producer and Pandit Hridaynath Mangeshkar, a genius who has not done as much work as he should have, composed the music. The songs – written by N.D. Mahanor, a farmer who found inspiration in nature and imbued it with human emotion and who later dedicated a book of poetry to Smita – are considered a seminal departure for Marathi literature since it adopts the Chayavad imagery

of Hindi poets, according to the director.

To understand why the songs of *Jait Re Jait* are pioneering for their total fusion of lyrics and melody, and why they are held in high literary esteem, it is necessary to quote a scholar of the subject, Arthur Dudney, on its essentials: 'The mid-twentieth- century Chayavad movement represents a stark departure from earlier Hindi and Urdu poetic traditions. Its philosophy was that poetry should deal in emotions above all else and that the poet should strive to express those emotions as tenderly as possible. The name "Chayavad" is untranslatable, as the literal meaning – "shadow-espousing" – sounds sinister in English. What is meant by "shadow" in this context is the emotion that trails in the wake of an event. It is that ripple of emotion and not the event itself that Chayavad poetry aims to capture in verse.'

The ripples of emotion created by the alchemy of performance, locale, songs and the insistent, infinitely varied beat of dhols surge and engulf us in a magical experience. Nagya (Mohan Agashe) is the tribal priest's (Nilu Phule) son, preparing for his initiation as junior priest. He rises from a dip in the sea like an indigenous Adonis, pure of heart and committed to be a punyavant, abjuring any sin. Two Adivasi men, who live in the village and often stand aside singing a ballad-like chorus, sometimes joined by a woman, straightaway cue us into the theatrical device of creating distance and adding a comment – sometimes sly, often sympathetic, and at times, ironic. Among the many songs is'*Amhi thakara thakara ranachi ga pakhara*' (We are Thakars, wild birds of the woods), an assertion of their identity. It powers their joyous dance to the beat of the dhol. Nagya, a master dhol player, loses himself in its beat.

After his initiation, as he goes round the village seeking blessings while others accompany dancing around him, we first see Chindi (Smita Patil) inside her father's hut framed by the door. She enters the frame as the women sing the line,'*Asa ekhad pakharu velaal jyala samor yetaya aabhaal*' (The rare delicate fledgling greets the sky). The recurring line, *asa ekhad pakharu* (the rare delicate fledgling), not only symbolizes Chindi as a free-flying bird but is also Anita's favourite phrase to describe her beloved sister. Chindi's freedom demands the mate she desires. She is mesmerized by the handsome Nagya. She does not join the other women in dance because as a woman who has left her husband, she is barred from it. Chindi castigates her alcoholic father for selling her for twenty-five rupees to a man she describes as 'a lump, with no head or body'.

Chindi is not coy about pursuing the man her heart is set on. Melting under her uninhibited invitation, Nagya forgets his vow to be a punyavant, a virtuous man. Chindi's eyes are pools of a heady mix of

desire, tenderness and love. I want you, she declares with a beguiling smile to a bemused Nagya. He wants to take honey from the beehive and Chindi tells him, 'You are a honeycomb in yourself.'

She woos him with abandon.'I am possessed by a bhoot,' she confesses her lovesick state. When he gingerly holds her wrist to check the pulse, Chindi boldly takes his hand and puts it on her breast for him to feel her heartbeat. Never before in an Indian film have we seen such a frank avowal of desire by a woman with such complete honesty. Chindi's eyes validate the female gaze, as she assesses and desires the man she has chosen.

Nagya's mother (Sulabha Deshpande) is reluctant to accept Chindi but other women persuade her that the young woman is a hard-worker who will earn money for the family. With a serious mien, Chindi hears others decide her fate and goes on to plough the field. She makes short work of paying off the first husband, the divorce symbolized by the breaking of a small stick. Now she is free to roam the forest with her beloved. Smita, dressed in a kashta sari that ends at the knee with the pallu tucked round her waist, a knotted choli, silver chains and beads around her slender neck, nose ring and armlet, wrists piled with glass bangles and silver kadas, is breathtakingly lovely – eyes blazing in a chiselled, unmade-up face.

Jait Re Jait unfolds against the myth of Lingoba, the deity who resides on the rock that rears up from the low hill like a finger to the sky. A garland of beehives circles the top of the rock and in that resides the queen bee. The obvious phallic symbolism of the rock enhances the frank sexual desire of the young couple, leavened as it is with tenderness. When Nagya is stung by a bee in his eye as he is cutting down a branch, it is Chindi who takes care of him – bathing, drying and caressing his torso with exquisite tenderness.

She soothes him when Nagya hallucinates that he is being attacked by bees again. Nagya is now determined to cut down the hives atop Lingoba's rock because he wants to drive the queen bee away. Climbing the sacred rock is taboo for the Thakars but Nagya, helped by a pregnant Chindi, is not deterred. They had gone to the base of the rock as newlyweds to seek blessings but climbing the hill any higher is forbidden to women.

A defiant Chindi stands by her husband, saying he can do what he wants and the village cannot impose their religious taboo. The men mock that she can get a third husband if Nagya perishes in his desecration. Unruffled, as their barbs slide off her body now alive with a new life, Chindi holds the rope made of twisted vines as Nagya goes up the hill. Nagya succeeds in cutting down the hives but he loses his own queen who is stung to death by the swarming bees.

It is a bitter-sweet end to a sensuous story of passionate

commitment and transgression of tribal code in an act of defiance. The filming in a Thakar village in Raigad was obviously strenuous. While Agashe had to carry a heavy dhol and dance to the frenzied beat alternating to subtle rhythms, Smita walked barefoot in the forest in blazing heat. Chindi's joyous abandon is wonderfully expressed as she walks in the dense forest, splashing her feet in a flowing stream, swaying backwards holding a tree, as the song of freedom,'*Mee raat takali, mee kaaj takali … mee laaj takali*' (I have shed the night, I have shed my old skin, I have shed shame), is filmed on her. Lata Mangeshkar's mellifluous voice is complemented by the male chorus: '*Hiranya paanath hiranya paanath chaval chaval chaalti, bhar jvanital naar ang modeeth chaalti*' (The green leaves rustle as she walks by, the lusty wench struts to a haughty gait). Admiration for her beauty and uninhibited passion is implicit.'*Mee laaj takali*' is an anthem that celebrates freedom from societal and gender-based restraint, urging her to revel in her sexuality, proclaiming openly that she wants her mate. It is direct and unapologetic.

Smita did the song in one day flat, starting at 10.30 in the morning and wrapping it up by 4.30 in the evening. There was to be no lip sync in the song picturized on her. To give the surprise Brechtian twist, one line within a long stanza had her lip sync. Binod Pradhan, shooting his first film, agreed that the device worked brilliantly. Jabbar was looking for a cameraman who could rough it out on location and create images that flow with the beat. He asked Mani Kaul to suggest someone and Mani Kaul mentioned Binod Pradhan, then fresh out of FTII.

Pradhan was trying to perfect his lighting for the early morning first shot of the ensemble song and dance. Both Smita and Mohan were pleased as punch that it had gone off so successfully. Or so they assumed. But Pradhan, ever the perfectionist, had second thoughts and wanted another take but it was too late, for the sun had already risen. The cameraman and director carried on with shooting the antaras and waited till evening to drop the bombshell: we have to shoot the first sequence again tomorrow morning. And this time, Jabbar took responsibility for the decision, that it had nothing to do with the cameraman. His lead actors, especially Agashe who had to carry the heavy drum, groaned and protested but had to fall in line the next morning, almost staying up the night for the take. This time, it went off without a hitch and what you have is screen magic. Smita, with her Seva Dal dance experience, was the on-location choreographer, watching the Adivasis dance, and excitedly, she would pick out a step as just perfect.

So taken was Smita with the story, setting and character of Chindi that she went location hunting with Jabbar. She started living with

the Thakars not just to get into her role but be one of them. Villagers of the wadi also found bit roles in the film. She played with the children with no reservations or inhibitions, to the extent that she developed a skin infection. The doctor in the director saw her scratching her hands and exclaimed, 'You have scabies!'

'Never mind, I will scratch my hands as part of my character's behaviour and you can apply ointment after the shot,' was Smita's insouciant reply.

Jait Re Jait won the Silver Medal for Best Marathi Film at the National Awards in 1978. The citation reads: 'For consistently transferring to the film medium a successful fictional work (*Thakurwadi* by G.N. Dandekar); for highlighting the mutual inconsistencies of love, of the fear of God and of superstition in a simple, innocent community of tribals, for the memorable use of the drum in evoking presence of the God (sic) and expressing the inexorable demands of love for a cinematic form which captures the lyricism, the cadence and the lilt of folk culture.' The film won Filmfare Awards for Smita and Jabbar, as well as the Maharashtra State Award for the director.

BHUMIKA *(1977): An Actor in Search of Her Role in Life*

In a way, this complex narrative completes Benegal's Smita trilogy that began with *Nishant*. An actress in search of her role in life is a metaphor, a paradigm, and uncannily anticipates Smita's own search for love and fulfilment in a series of relationships.

Usha of *Bhumika* is the role of a lifetime. It is fascinatingly complex in its ambitious structure, ironic ambiguities and the multi-layered characterization of the protagonist. Based on the revealing autobiography of 1940s Marathi film star Hansa Wadkar, *Sangte Aika*, Benegal creates a rebel looking for a cause. Usha is a prisoner struggling against the golden cage her family has trapped her in. Her rebellion is against her sexual confinement and the confusion of role-playing. She is exploited by her cold, crafty and mean-spirited husband Keshav Dalvi (Amol Palekar, chillingly sadistic). The film dares to imply incestuous overtones, because he was also her sullen mother's lover. The only person who gives Usha unconditional love is the grandmother, a cherished memory from an otherwise troubled childhood. The grandmother, a noted singer in her day, is also her teacher, grounding her in music. It is by virtue of her singing that young Usha is brought to Bombay to audition for a role.

Benegal's layered screenplay is strewn with flashbacks and film-within-film sequences. The lavni dance that Urvashi (Usha's screen name as a top actress) performs with the required gusto and seductive appeal punctuates the narrative at various points to denote not just

another chapter in Usha's life but also Benegal's ambitious tribute to popular cinema. The layered narrative goes into black and white, sepia tones and graded shades of colour to weave in this other important strand of the film. The director draws a quick, sharp graph of film history from the 1930s through the mid-1950s, offering us vignettes of genres and evolving film styles via Urvashi's films, or the ones she watches being made when she is brought to the studio. This offers Smita an opportunity and challenge to make transitions as Usha the woman and Urvashi the actress. It creates a dynamic interplay between the reality of her life and her evolving screen persona in the film-within-film scenes. As a screenplay, *Bhumika* is a landmark in Indian cinema and deservedly won a National Award. Vanraj Bhatia has created memorable songs (for Urvashi's films, Usha's riyaaz, or on the gramophone) but remarkably, there is no background score, something we notice only in retrospect.

The ambitious Keshav sees in the young Usha a meal ticket for life and takes her away from the carefree home in Konkan. Their first exposure to the studio is brilliant. The group enters while a fantasy is being shot – an evil magician conjures up fire while the virtuous heroine upbraids him – and the grandmother advises the little girl to listen to the diction and dialogue delivery. Benegal introduces us to the importance placed on highfalutin rhetoric endemic to the genre. There is also a sly joke. Idling away in the compound is an actor dressed in pauranic costume and puffing away at a beedi.

Usha is groomed to enter the film world, which, unsurprisingly, tries to mould her into saleable stereotypes. Benegal pays homage to film history, the genres of the 1940s in particular, by creating as many different roles for his protagonist (taking anachronistic liberties in the process), though he is meticulous in creating the period details and references to contemporary events to date the course of Usha's life and the changing milieu. As a teenager who is just making her mark in films, it is the early 1940s and she is shown weeping over the pathos of the two sisters in *Kismet*, the first blockbuster of Hindi cinema.

The teenaged Usha has the knowing, beguiling charm of a woman testing her powers on a man she has known all her life. There is also an undercurrent of defiance in her towards her mother who, it is suggested, was involved with Keshav when Usha was a little girl. She is the skittish young woman asserting her own sexual freedom against the dictates of her mother from whom she distances herself emotionally.

Every stage in Usha's life takes off from the lavni, like a return to the mukhda in the elaborate exposition of a ragamala composition. She has been exposed to violence from childhood – her mother (Sulabha Deshpande) beating her, then a sick father taking a broom to

the mother. Keshav has been a presence all her life, barely tolerated by the rebellious little girl, but someone she marries impulsively to defy her mother. It is she who makes the first sexual overture and announces her marriage to the distraught mother.

There is an exquisitely filmed scene that evokes, spatially, the underlying stresses of a matrilineal relationship over three generations – a bridally decked-up Usha practises the old song '*Modera baajo*' with her grandmother while the mother stands isolated in the background, a blurred figure, followed by the final shot of her walking alone into a wide corridor, and the empty space faintly echoes to the sound of the jugalbandi.

Every relationship Usha enters into has its own key and Smita finds the right pitch to fine-tune the changing nature of her series of affairs with men who are different in temperament, expectations and what they are willing to give to the relationship. Her marriage is a daily round of power negotiation with the sadistic husband. Simmering anger spills over into violence, verbal and physical, even after the birth of their daughter. There is a shocking scene where Keshav slaps her before taking off his belt menacingly.

Gossip of an affair with her narcissistic co-star Rajan (Anant Nag) fuels Keshav's anger, as does Usha's threats of retiring from films. Rajan is a true friend who helps Usha when she finally walks out of her marriage, but he shies away from commitment. She is flirtatious with him though she often has to massage his fragile ego. The most fascinating relationship portrayed is her bond with the intellectual, self-obsessed artsy director Sunil (Naseeruddin Shah mockingly relishes the role with an insider's knowledge). Smita brings an edgy playfulness and wayward whimsy to breach Sunil's lofty reserve. He throws her into the water and she surfaces, dripping wet but lit up with a sense of release. He is an existential guru handing out gyaan,about how people in this country think with their emotions, leaving reason behind. You see her with him in jeans and a loose kurta, face scrubbed clean of make-up. His cynical intellectualism pricks her curiosity but she draws back from their obvious mutual attraction. *I fear for my daughter*, is her explanation. Sunil disabuses her. 'You are afraid of your image. Your fans are your mirror and you are an idol in that mirror.' Prophetic words, even if they are spoken with self-conscious swagger for effect by an intellectual poseur. This precious relationship also envisages a botched double suicide pact. The self-dramatization of this theatrical pair is poised between comedy and bathos.

The final relationship with the older man Kale (Amrish Puri), set in the ways of landed gentry, is seemingly mature, the result of mutual understanding by consenting adults. There is an echo of Usha's

inchoate longing for a father figure, authoritative and yet promising the stability of certitude. What he can't do is deprive his wife of many years her rank and status. Usha is like a child-woman who has come home after years of confused wandering that has left her weary and wary.

The complicated plot is hard to summarize but fascinating to follow, for the way it juxtaposes Usha's turbulent marriage with her career graph, her interaction with the film world of directors, producers and co-stars. There is a contrast in the emotional tone and pitch of these alternating passages. The initial films of Urvashi the actor run the gamut of genres. There is the gender-bending action film where she is lithe and athletic in a bandana, a mask, and her trilling laughter conveys the sheer enjoyment of fencing while flirting with a dashing opponent. There is also a coy dance, to the song '*Tumhare bina jeena lage ghar mein*', and much later in her career, a series of snippets of roles in various women-centric melodramas – a tawaif who will not sell her virtue, a stern defendant in court mouthing lines like, 'How can I prove my innocence? Give me Meera's cup of poison if not Sita's agnipariksha'. A deliberate turn of head to tell us she knows it's a good shot before the director calls cut. The director comments that it is better than a Bengali film. The toned down, more realistic style of New Theatres, and a Suchitra Sen-like tilt of head. By now, Urvashi is a pro and getting weary of the business.

The central scene is the confrontation with an abusive Keshav. She expects it, and challenges him: Come on, hit me. He drags her to the puja room and asks her to swear her innocence. 'I swear,' she says, facing the mandir, her back to us. A long deliberate pause, then a close-up of her face, eyes narrowed, lips open to reveal clenched teeth. 'I will do only what I want.' This, after spitting on his hand. Rage and determination in her eyes, the steady voice vibrant with emotion, Smita stamps the scene with the hallmark of unsurpassable perfection.

Benegal plays with mirrors in many crucial scenes. The famous still from the film, with Smita's pallu down as she stands before a wardrobe with an oval mirror, has her facing Keshav. An image of spiteful, spitting defiance. She gets dressed and walks out, to his sneer that she will come back as she usually does. Benegal remarks that the use of mirrors could be read as a hint of an actor's narcissism. She could be shedding a certain kind of personality when changing her sari. The beauty of *Bhumika* lies in the way it can be read at so many levels.

Later, when she is alone in her hotel room, she is staring hard at the smaller mirror as if she is looking deep into her troubled soul. It is at this juncture that Kale enters her life and offers his estate as a sanctuary away from tinsel glamour. She is de facto mistress of the

estate, forms a bond with Kale's young son and his bedridden wife. But she is not to step out of the gates. The sick wife bitterly sums up a rebel woman's journey: '*Bistar badal jaate hain, rasoi badal jaati hai, admiyon ke naqaab badal jaate hain, par aadmi nahin badalte*!' She asks Usha, now playing feudal chatelaine dressed in nav-vari saris, resplendently bejewelled in traditional ornaments: '*Aur kitna bhatkegi tu*?'

The only answer is to live by herself, accepting the essential loneliness of every human being. Usha is rescued by Keshav who brings the police to the estate, but that is the extent of his role in her life now. Usha is back in the familiar hotel room and meets her daughter, happily married and pregnant. Her daughter has broken the cycle of bad marriages of three generations who have had to bear the stigma of a devdasi background. Is she finally at peace? Benegal creates the many moods, needs and complexities that drive his heroine along an impulsive, sometimes precipitous route to self-discovery.

What is extraordinary is Smita's ability to shade every nuance of feeling, from temperamental star tantrums to the lonely maturity she has reached, when she has to finally accept that like every complex individual, she must learn to live alone. It is a tenuous tranquillity won the hard, turbulent way. Smita takes us along the journey of an individual's quest with precision and passion.

For an actor confronting her own uncertainties, Smita brought total empathy and intellectual understanding to the paradox of a passionate, wilful woman who cannot find herself, though the actress in her tries, but the actress is herself manipulated into many roles. Smita delicately maintained the tension between the two sides to her role – the woman, and the image touched by the loud theatricality of her own setting.

She also had to tap her native roots to perform her lavni dances with vigour, disproving for once the familiar charge that she just couldn't do the usual gyrations or the mujras that some commercial films demanded when she first timorously tested the waters. She had difficulty in getting it right. Benegal had to summon Vidyatai to the sets. The stern taskmaster told her daughter in no uncertain terms: Whatever you undertake, you have to perfect it – be it dance or sweeping the floor. Finally, Smita got into the robust spirit of this energetic, authentic Maharashtrian dance form and perfected its demanding footwork. Dance demands grace of movement and implicit seduction. Smita's body language imbibed the grace as part of her whole being. It was not a separate commodity, to be turned on for routine titillation. As for seduction, those magnetic eyes sucked you in honestly, scorning all beguiling tricks and the dishonesty of artifice.

That is why Smita is one actor who can carry off mythic

dimensions without losing her rooted reality. In *Bhumika*, Benegal confers a mythic aura on a woman already subjected to the instant mythologies that popular cinema spawns. The actress-heroine is Usha and her screen name is Urvashi. In her are blended the Rig Vedic deity of dawn as well as the later legend of the apsara Urvashi, in search of her human lover, Pururavas. D.D. Kosambi argued in *Myth and Reality* that Urvashi is a later metamorphosis of Usha and thus, the two images are fused. Intimations of mythic immortality add ironic poignancy to Usha's fragile vulnerability.

Indian cinema is comfortable with archetypes like Radha of *Mother India*. The archetypal strong mother is unchanging, and variations over time diminish her moral authority. Each rebel is different. Each battle is different. Which is why, if we look for Usha's precursors, we find it in *Kunku*'s Nirmala. V. Shantaram created the first domestic guerrilla who resisted her much older husband and finds the ambivalent freedom of a widow. Rebels are complex individuals, offering no-one-size-fits-all solutions. Smita's Usha is unique.

Benegal affirms that he was supremely confident of Smita, just twenty-two at the time, doing full justice to such a complex role that spans an actor's life from childhood to middle age. There is an uncanny melding of an unconventional actress's memoirs played by a talented young actress who inhabits the ficionalized role and whose later life seems to echo the contradictions of this screen character's restless search for love. Smita enters Usha emotionally, physically and mentally, yet does not get 'lost' in the persona she projects. Close-ups are both revealing and demanding. Smita retains control in these close-ups and resists the temptation to 'act' – her intuitive intelligence combines elegantly with Benegal's masterly direction. Smita is an actor who trusted her director and put herself entirely in his hands.

Benegal recalls how Smita was asked to learn riding and fencing for the swashbuckler film-within-film. But she revelled in playing hooky, gallivanting off on a scooter with one of Benegal's young assistants, Mandip Kakkar (who also unfortunately died young). Benegal then had to play stern schoolmaster, forbidding them to touch the office scooter. And then, near-disaster struck, after a chastened Smita went back to her lessons. As Benegal tells it, when she was rehearsing with a foil, just before the shot, the stunt master did a certain movement, and by mistake, she moved and caught the blow right across her cheek. There was this huge purple welt across her face. Luckily, her skin did not tear. Otherwise, there would have been a scar and she would have had to get plastic surgery done to remove it. 'We had to run around, get ice. Anyway there was no scar.'

Smita had no inhibitions about consulting fellow actors if it could help her performance. Amol Palekar, who played her jealous,

scheming and ruthless husband, recalls how he would share his experience of talking to Hansa Wadkar with Smita who was thirsty for information. He would pass on to Smita all that he learnt about the legendary rebel. He had an advantage. Hansa Wadkar was a neighbour and he was friendly with her daughters and often went to meet her. When he had to play Dalvi, he met Hansa-ji and talked to her at length. Benegal had introduced Smita to Hansa Wadkar's extended family that lived in the Grant Road area. Among them was actress Nanda's father, Master Vinayak.

Consciously avoiding a traditional background score, Benegal wanted Kishori Amonkar and her mother Mogubai Kurdikar to sing for his film. Kishori Amonkar warned him that her mother equated singing for films with prostitution. Thus forewarned, he approached Mogubai and her first reaction was: me sing for films? All of Benegal's persuasive powers could not convince the redoubtable Mogubai. Benegal ruefully says: 'Mogubai did not agree to sing for *Bhumika* – which is why I couldn't take her daughter Kishori either. My plan was to get them to sing for the grandmother and granddaughter in the film. Under the circumstances, I took the other great singer Saraswati Rane and her granddaughter. They belong to the Kirana gharana as against Mogubai and her daughter who belong to the Jaipur/Atrauli gharana.' So much effort in creating a song that recurs like a leitmotif at different points of the narrative.

There is another interesting episode that occurred during the shooting of this film. There is the crucial scene where Dalvi is violent and Usha must break down in fear. After two rehearsals, Smita still wasn't getting it right. Benegal quietly told Amol to hit her. Amol was taken aback and hesitated but the director insisted. So, without any warning, he hit Smita and she was shocked! Her abject fear showed, as Dalvi took out his belt menacingly. Benegal got what he wanted and called cut. A very contrite Amol hugged Smita in apology.

In an early interview with Smita, Piroj Wadia writes of how Smita talked about her difficulty in controlling her emotions. She remembers one particular scene in *Bhumika* where she was supposed to cry. 'I just couldn't bring myself to cry. Shyam told me to think of the most horrible things, but I couldn't just cry. The whole unit had to wait for one and a half hours. And once I started, I found I couldn't stop and I mucked up my dialogue, spluttering my lines and they had to do several takes.'

The role of the restless, rebellious, eternally seeking Usha could be disturbing to a young actor initiated into a world where you have to enter a new reality every time you face the camera and get under the skin of different personae. Benegal remembers how Smita was not entirely convinced at that time if cinema was where her future lay,

whether it truly was her vocation, even after a fine performance in *Nishant*. It was finally with *Bhumika* that she accepted her calling. 'Acting was not an amateur avocation but her vocation,' sums up Benegal, satisfied that his protégé vindicated his choice. In *Bhumika* she is volatile and voracious for experience. She also knows how to hold it all in and not do anything overtly 'actorly' and stay still to let the scene speak for itself.

Smita redefined the complexity of a woman who is an actor in search of her role in life. Somewhere along the way, the many roles she plays on screen in a long career fuse into the woman off screen. Two processes are set in motion; fusion and the need to separate the reel image from the real woman. A challenge so early in her career to which Smita rose with nuanced sensitivity and passion that is alternatingly wayward, explosive and intensely focussed. Usha is a rebel where her celebrity becomes a golden cage, her emotional vulnerability exposed to be exploited by the many men who come into her life. Her sexuality is both an asset and weakness.

Feminist readings of *Bhumika* reinforce the critical acclaim that greeted it. In her essay, 'Third World Women's Cinema', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 May 1986, Susie Tharu remarks: 'The filmic focus … establishes her as the central character as well as the problem (the disruption, the enigma) the film will explore and resolve … it is clear that to search herself is, for a woman, a tragic enterprise. An enterprise in which she is doomed to fail, but can fail bravely and heroically.'

Ashish Rajadhyaksha, who often damns'middle cinema' with faint praise, concedes that Benegal was looking to 'construct an indigenous authenticity for an audience that would not wish to be a part of the dominant mass-entertainment modes of India's film industry. Certainly this is where *Bhumika* has proved the most influential, in the way it expanded the thematic repertoire of New Indian Cinema, and eventually allowed a more sustained engagement with the mass cultural idiom itself.'

Bhumika is a triumph for the director–actor relationship, capping the success of the early rural trilogy. *International Film Guide* ranked Shyam Benegal as one of the five Directors of the Year in 1979, alongside Martin Scorsese and Werner Herzog.

AKALER SANDHANE *(In Search of Famine, Bengali, 1980): The Ultimate Accolade*

When an internationally renowned veteran of parallel cinema made his self-reflexive film about film-making, who did he cast as an actress playing herself? None other than Smita, as the iconic star of art cinema with an all-India reputation. One who had shown commitment

to this kind of politically conscious, experimental cinema. He could have chosen a Bengali actress but what he wanted was a Bombay actor with a charismatic presence that made the deglamourized look desirable. Desirable in terms of her ability to maintain the balance between an actor and the role she is playing in the film-within-film without being self-conscious. Her being Smita Patil was as essential as the role she plays in the film-within-film being made by the crew from Calcutta. This is a huge compliment and a bigger challenge, to her self-image, perception of her public image and the craft she has to show while acting in the film being made. Smita does all this with effortless ease. She brings unobtrusive grace to 'being Smita' – be it her handloom saris or the curlers on her head or the cheery interaction with the unit.

Akaler Sandhane is one of Mrinal Sen's best films, a continuation of the mellow introspective mood set off a year earlier with *Ek Din Pratidin.* The polemical radicalism of his enfant terrible days has now given way to a probing – intellectual, political and moral – of his middle-class milieu with self-critical honesty. And yet, there is a greater degree of compassion for all classes caught in the maelstrom of conflict and change. *Akaler Sandhane* takes a film crew to a rural location, examines the process of film-making, its motives and repercussions when it attempts to recreate the past – the famine of 1943 – and accepts the inevitable consequences of recreated reality before abandoning the project.

Dhritiman Chaterji, a close associate of Mrinal Sen, plays the director of the film they are all set to make in Hatui, a village two hours away from the comforts of Calcutta. A fleet of cars arrives at a crumbling mansion of zamindari vintage. Grandeur in decay is sure to ring in nostalgia – of courtly grace, of beautiful women playing the sitar and singing ghazals, clouded in the scent of days gone by. Or at least, this is what one of the inquisitive young men starts reading out from a book pulled off the shelves of an impressive library. Smita makes a late entry – her head tilted up to the soaring ceiling of the vast, pillared verandah – inhaling the past and curious about the present, perhaps?

She plays herself – Smita Patil, the indomitable icon of New Cinema, wedded to capturing the essence of 'truth' in her performance – in low key. There are no starry airs. She is unobtrusive in her brown handloom sari, in contrast to the other actress, dressed in a bright red polka-dotted salwar kameez. The two share a room but little else. An actor can play to the gallery and succumb to self-adulation. Or she can use the opportunity to test and vindicate her own perception of and commitment to a cinema that takes an ideological stand even while it captures, or tries to capture, the reality it seeks out in all its

complexity. Mrinal Sen acknowledges Fellini's influence but does not, sensibly, seek to emulate the larger-than-life gusto of the predictably unpredictable genius. Smita too stays in tune. There are no histrionic explosions or knowing glamorous posturing. Definitely not the Anita Ekberg of *La Dolce Vita*. Smita's performance is a calibration of escalating responses – intellectual curiosity, genuine interest in the people she meets and an effort to internalize all the stimulation and information, and then portray it with honest-to-the-bone integrity.

Smita as Smita Patil transcends playing herself. She initiates us into the process of researching her subject, as she interacts with the local women, to get a feel of both their present concerns and the past that she will help re-enact. Curiosity, followed by hesitancy, and then a small degree of ease and acceptance. The crew's interaction with the people of the village plays out this dynamic, but no human interaction, especially between outsiders and suspicious locals, can ever be predetermined. Smita is more humane and empathy comes naturally to her, unlike the director of the film-within-film who can't contain his irritation and impatience while the mood of the village gradually turns hostile. They have ceased to be flattered by all this media attention and some of them see a parallel between what happened in 1943, and the new capitalism that comes in the wake of city folks.

Smita's sensitivity to every changing nuance in the local women's behaviour as they retreat into hostile reticence is not only acute but almost takes her over to the other side. It begins with overtures to the lone descendant of the erstwhile zamindar family occupying one room in the mansion, tending to her paralysed husband. The production manager is justifiably proud that he managed to get keys to the rooms of seventeen other heirs scattered across India; a few are abroad. Smita ventures out to make the acquaintance of the elderly lady (Gita Sen, Mrinal Sen's wife, who has essayed such marvellous cameos in many films) and strikes a warm sympathetic bond with her that deepens with passing days. Smita is comfortable, sitting on a mat on the floor, following the woman into her kitchen, gently drawing her out into sharing details of her life with genuine interest. Smita and Gita Sen play out a duet where formality imperceptibly changes into inter-generational intimacy.

The rest of the village is agog with curiosity about this city invasion, with their noisy generators and lavish buying of vegetables in the local bazaar, driving up the prices for locals. Children take to crying out 'cut cut', imitating the director, Dhritiman, who unbends enough to befriend Haren (Rajen Tarafdar, a well-known director), the local weaver who was part of folk theatre in his younger days. He becomes their self- appointed intermediary.

The film is recreating the famine of 1943, through the life of Savitri (played by Smita Patil). Her old father-in-law refuses to sell their three bighas to the local priest and migrate to Calcutta as so many hungry, dispossessed villagers have. Savitri is a mute witness to the offer and its rejection.

Mrinal Sen and his ace cameraman K.K. Mahajan shoot this sequence in a single long, panning shot. The style is more that of a documentary. The film crew is unaware of the impact this particular story has on Durga (Sreela Majumdar), a young woman who works as a maid at the mansion. As the film- within-film progresses, you see Savitri coming home late at night with precious oil and rice, walking past her sick husband and baby. She is silent in the face of her husband's angry questions about how she got the money. She remains stubbornly mute and the infuriated husband raises his hand in violence. The camera cuts to Durga's shocked reaction. Her real life runs parallel to the fictional reality being dredged from the past.

Yet another tour de force of film craft is the scene where a line of villagers head out with their meagre possessions. Smita is somewhere in the front, a bundle on her head. They file past the trolley camera. The camera pans to the director, calling out instructions to Smita in a firm, quiet voice: Stop … turn … come back … go to the tree … now cry. Smita performs with grave expertise, finally coming to a tree, as the bundle slips off her head and she breaks into gut-wrenching sobs.

Dhritiman Chaterji recalls that this scene was improvised between Smita and himself. Mrinal-da had often trusted Dhritiman to perform on the spur of the moment – in Sen's earlier film *Padatik*, for example. Dhritiman speaks with affection and pride of how Mrinal-da let his actors improvise when he was confident that they were keyed into the context and content of what was in the director's mind. There were a few other such extemporaneous scenes in the film, including the ironic 'hunger game'. After the shoot is cut short because of rain, the crew gathers in the house to play a guessing game with photographs. Most of them are pictures of emaciated people. Smita holds up each photo and the rest have to guess the context and the year. Her reaction is clue to both what the real Smita would have felt and also the director's damning indictment. What some think as 1943 turns out to be far more recent: 1971. Hunger and starvation are the ever-present truth of rural India. It is a key scene that needs no comment.

Many such incidents build up cumulatively to awaken the crew to the consequences of what they are doing. Durga is the prism. A disturbed Durga wants a day off because her baby is sick. Smita tells her she can take the day off and her daily wage of sixty rupees will not be deducted. Unknowingly, she helps the young woman, who finds her own life being portrayed by these outsiders with no clue to

the havoc they are wreaking in a rural society where everyone is privy to the life of others.

The crisis has been building up after the departure of the tantrum-throwing actress who was to play a prostitute. Haren tries to find a local girl to play the role and becomes an outcaste, as does the crew. Haren, the link between locals and outsiders, wonders why people who did not ostracize him when he played drunks and debauchees in theatre are so outraged by what is shown in cinema. Pointing to Smita, he asks, 'Look at this didi. She is so well known. Educated. But even when she played a fallen woman, no one criticized. What purity must a person have to portray another person's grief in such a natural manner.'

This is validation of Smita the actor and of realistic cinema but not when cinematic fiction impinges on the real lives of real people. Mrinal Sen the film-maker is indicting his own tribe for insensitivity. Indirectly, he raises the question: where does truth end and voyeurism begin? Is documenting unpalatable reality a form of voyeurism, however well-meaning the film-maker's intention? This unsparing introspection raises *Akaler Sandhane*to a level few films about film-making have achieved. Because, there is always an element of vainglorious self-validation in such attempts. Mrinal Sen questions the efficacy of urban intelligentsia's well-meant intervention in a rural milieu where education and sensibilities render them worlds apart.

Can an actor playing herself escape the charge of narcissism inherent to the situation? Dhritiman Chaterji, with his impeccable credentials of acting with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, played himself in a television film made by Anjan Dutta. He speaks from the perspective of personal experience. 'I found no trace of narcissism in Smita. The balance is between reality and fiction, of being yourself and having certain things written for you as fiction; retaining that balance becomes critical. I think she was very much at ease with it. The bunch of people doing the film-within-film, living together, eating together, talking in the evenings in a household without many modern comforts … She fit in because of her background, her mentality. If she had been the usual kind of star expecting something more comfortable, it would have been difficult. A film like *Akaler* would be impossible to make today, when there are vanity vans for everybody with all sorts of comforts and the actor comes to the set when everything is ready. Because everybody needed to be there, contributing, improvising. Smita fit into that mode easily. Otherwise, it would have been difficult.'

I asked him a speculative question: Why did Mrinal Sen choose Smita over Shabana for this film? He has cast Shabana in *Khandhar*

(1983) and *Ek Din Achanak* (1989) as well as the little seen *Genesis* (1986, which incidentally, he had promised Smita; he wrote that on a napkin). Dhritiman was taken aback. It had never occurred to him. After a long reflective pause, he confessed: he could not imagine anybody else playing the poor peasant in the film-within-film. Smita was just so right.

He adds, 'Her only problem was not getting good Marathi vegetarian food. We were all resolutely non-vegetarian! Mrinal- da being a good East Bengali had to have fish all the time. That must have turned her stomach. I remember that. She used to borrow vegetables and cooking oil from the cook and made her own food on a stove.' The late K.K. Mahajan also remembered Smita cooking simple rice and vegetables for herself during the entire shoot. But that was Smita, uncomplaining and making adjustments as the situation demanded.

Though she must have been disappointed at her disqualification for the National Award because her voice was dubbed, the international acclaim for the film was reward enough. Mrinal Sen wrote in 1984:'When she did the role of an actress in my *Akaler Sandhane,* a film-within-a-film, she play- acted a famished peasant woman of Bengal with remarkable ease and infinite skill. All this and a lot more, all in less than ten years, have given Smita the rare distinction of a highly polished actress comparing favourably with any world-class performer.'

CHAKRA *(1981): Earth Mother of the Slums*

Do those destined to die young share a fatal attraction? One can ask this question from the comfortable perch of the present. Smita's image had grown larger than life by now and film- makers, looking for a star to anchor their avant-garde dream in the grimy soil of Bombay's teeming slums, found their lodestar. One such director was Rabindra Dharmaraj, a much admired ad film-maker who hungered to step outside its glitzy consumerism. His past as a photographer in Vietnam and his commitment to social causes drove him back to Jaywant Dalvi's controversial novel, considered a modern Marathi classic by some and voyeurism by a fastidious few. His lifelong ambition was to translate it to the screen. The time was ripe, now that the climate was propitious for realistic cinema that believed in telling it as it is.

Chakra enters the crime-ridden, drink-sodden, drug-hazed world of slums, which are anonymous in spite of their ubiquity. It strips sentimental good cheer (which is so tempting when telling doomed tales of the poor) off the stark tragedy of Amma's life. The narrative is episodic, though linear. A large part of the film is narrated from Amma's perspective with sympathy, though irony constantly hovers

over the doomed lives of those scrabbling to eke out a decent existence. Amma is swallowed by the anonymity of the huge city, for she is not given a specific name. She is just Amma, the urban ghetto's counterpart of the archetypal Mother India, pouring into the cannibalizing slum like yet another hopeful migrant fleeing her own brand of tragedy. Sadly, there are no moral certitudes for this slum-dweller mother, fighting tooth and claw to retain a toehold in a crime-and-drug infested fetid cesspool.

Amma mirrors the tragedy of urban India. Dharmaraj plays it out against the canvas of Smita's face in the film's opening image. The close-up shows her eyes shut. The light gets brighter, revealing her face, sweat-beaded forehead, tattoo-etched dusky skin. Pounding sound is followed by the first flashback, of her husband taking money on a boat, in what is obviously a seaside village. Next, her closed eyes open into near slits as if she is trying hard to remember happier times. She is lovingly massaging her baby on her outstretched legs and her husband comes with a gold chain for the infant. Another flashback follows, struggling to escape her rapist, kicking him hard and screaming. It ends with her husband smashing the moneylender's head with a stone and drops of blood speckle her shocked face.

Pounding sound, followed by yet another flashback. Her eyes are now fully open. They are running away in desperation as drums and atonal strings accompany their flight. Final sound of pounding, a railway yard, cops chasing her husband and shooting him dead.

At last, silence. A blank stare in her eyes. This gripping prelude encapsulates Amma's dramatic past before the pressing problems of the present take over.

Amma's foremost concern is her teenaged son Benwa (Ranjit Chowdhury). He is a drifter, drawn to the flashy exuberance of Looka (a swaggering Naseeruddin Shah), who descends on their slum as if he is conferring an honour on them. Looka is Amma's on-and-off lover, a pimp who is also into illicit liquor among other petty crimes. He is rather proud of his criminal record, of having to present himself regularly to the police. While Amma accepts Looka for what he is, she wants a decent job and settled life for Benwa. That is also the reason why she is committed to Anna (Kulbhushan Kharbanda), the solid and stolid truck driver, with whom she hopes to have a settled life. All she wants is stability, no police chakkar for Benwa and a hut she can call her own. But for Benwa, Looka is irresistible for his care-a-damn attitude and insouciant charm. The day spent in his company, while Looka drinks and whores, leaves him both embarrassed and dazzled. He is a teenager looking for role models.

Amma offers no explanation or apology for the two men in her life. Nor her sexuality. Her sexual relationships are based on the honest

needs of an older woman who has experienced life in the raw. Smita brings mature self-confidence into this aspect shown in considerable detail. The real attraction is Looka, who is playful and unpredictable. The silent exchange of looks, a little bit of footsie and her knowing smile establish the old familiarity of their relationship. Amma could settle with Looka if only he could be tied down. The sexual chemistry between them is open for all to read. He pours drink down her mouth, she lays back, pallu off and legs bare to her knees, laughing almost hysterically till she calms down and gets serious. She wants a respectable job for her son, like a boot polish spot at Fort, and not selling hooch at an illicit joint which is what Looka has in mind for making easy money. She wants Benwa to save money, get married to a nice girl and have his own hut. Since Looka is a free bird who wants no permanent ties, she takes in Anna who had run away from home some twenty years ago. The fear that Anna may go back always lurks under the surface.

Looka accepts Anna as Amma's new partner. Her tryst with Looka is followed by Anna's arrival. Benwa alerts them in time and Looka slinks away. Anna has brought her a sari. He is solicitous, remarks she is looking unwell. Without any trace of guilt, Amma applies kumkum and tends to him devotedly.

The private lives of people are public in the slum. When Amma emerges the next morning, stretching luxuriously, the lech of a sweeper eyes her. He asks, looking greedily at her swollen lips: who chewed your lips? His insolence unleashes her ire.

Next follows the famous (or infamous, as you will) bathing under the tap scene. Her sari tucked securely around her torso, she stretches to reach her back, washing with water poured from a mug. Her bent knee bares her leg to the thigh while she cleans her teeth, nose, shoulders and underarms. All under the lecherous eyes of the sweeper watching her lasciviously. The camera closes in on her back, her wet sari clinging to her butt cleavage. She walks away with a swing, first ignoring and then roundly abusing the voyeur. It makes us all complicit in the act of voyeurism.

This scene has expectedly drawn enormous attention, almost to the exclusion of everything else in *Chakra*. It demands a detailed analysis because it has become the central issue of the film for so many, both critics and defenders. One must remember that it was the early 1980s when feminist discourse was largely puritanical. It conceded that putting a woman on a pedestal was as stifling as exploiting her as a sex object. As for *Chakra*'s poster of Smita's back plastered all over Bombay, this section of outraged puritanism saw it as catering to voyeurism. Icons of New Cinema are as liable to exploitation as Bollywood bimbos, they maintained. B.R. Ishara's *Chetna* (1970),

where you saw Rehana Sultana from the back standing with her bare legs apart (up to mid-thigh), was the shocker that jolted Hindi cinema out of its decorous hypocrisy. The protagonist was a call girl and so it was accepted. Though female sexual oppression was very much the subtext of New Cinema, there was nothing like *Chakra*before 1980. Votaries of the new freedom saw it as the raw reality of slum life, portrayed without inhibition or apology. Even Iqbal Masud, an ardent Smita fan under his erudite critic avatar, was shocked, but later came to terms with the impact of the film as a whole. Parallel cinema advocates were certainly discomfited and went looking for explanations. Today, it might just be possible to read it as poverty porn, a part of slum tourism for jaded westerners. For an audience used to seeing a woman cut up into gyrating body parts, Amma's image is that of a whole person, not a collection of body parts on which the camera zooms in for enhanced titillation.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle, as it usually does. The first view is prudery at its narrowest. The second legitimizes the male gaze as the norm. Why not see it as a confident woman's assertion of her right to her body, to display or flaunt it if she so desires? Feminist discourse (in India) at that time accepted the *expression* of female sexuality if it was discreet and tasteful. *Assertion* was dangerous. Sensuous was acceptable, erotic slightly risqué, but flagrant female sexuality was rocking the patriarchal boat too far and confronted women's own internalization of norms laid down by men. Female sexuality and validation of a woman's sexual desire do not stretch to motherhood. Popular cinema desexualizes the mother, as if she has ceased being a woman with sexual needs once she is raised to saintly motherhood. What is so radical about Amma is that she is a woman and a mother. The very fact that she has no given name and is universally called Amma is a way to depersonalize her. But this woman is too vital, her needs are unapologetically basic. Smita animates Amma with a distinct personality, even if her situation and expectations from life are ordinary. She is also a warm, caring person helping out a neighbour who has a baby, admonishing the husband to take care of the new mother. Dealing with voyeurs is no big deal for her. Amma despises the voyeur as a coward getting his jollies vicariously. Like beauty, voyeurism lies in the eye of the viewer.

We could even say this was New Cinema's equivalent of Marilyn Monroe's white skirt flying up. That picture from Billy Wilder's *Seven Year Itch* (1955) is now celebrated as an iconic portrait of innocent sensuality. Take Jane Fonda's nude act in Roger Vadim's sci-fi fantasy, *Barbarella* (1968). That had also divided the American critical establishment down the middle. To quote from Patricia Bosworth's book, *Jane Fonda: The Private Life of a Public Woman*: 'Many critics

panned *Barbarella* as “glossy trash”.’

Trust the important, iconic women critics to be more perceptive and conscious of film history. Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* insisted:‘Jane Fonda having sex on wilted feathers is more charming and bouncy than ever, the American girl triumphing by her innocence over a lewd comic strip of the future – she has the skittishness of a teenage voluptuary and when she takes off her clothes, she is playful and deliciously aware of the naughtiness of what she does … that innocent’s sense of naughtiness, of being a tarnished lady, keeps her from being just another naked actress.’ Molly Haskell, author of *From Reverence to Rape*, predicted, ‘*Barbarella* will be a watershed movie; Vadim is a Svengali – like von Sternberg was to Dietrich. He was ahead of his time, portraying female sexuality.’

Rabindra Dharmaraj was too young and untested to be Smita’s Svengali. She needed no Svengali because she was confident of her own talent and personhood. She did not have to be an exhibitionist to prove her worth as an actor and a woman. Smita also believed that the small independent film depended on her to get audiences into the theatre. By this time, she was also working in mainstream cinema. In fact, it was the cavorting in a wet sari in *Namak Halaal* that was more titillating than the *Chakra* scene.

This digression is necessary to show up the hypocrisy of outrage at raw honesty and condoning what passes for romance in commercial films. Paradoxically, Smita was part of both, and she battled these contradictions as best as she could. As an actor, Smita ought to have known it would be used for publicity, aware of its consequences in a censorious society that is uncomfortable with open assertion of female sexuality. Smita was proud of her lithe, athletic body and knew its power. But, and this is a very big but, she did not exploit it for cheap publicity nor to land roles. Confidence in her sexuality is as much a part of her personality as her talent.

Lalita Tamhane, a close friend of Smita who authored *Smita, Smit ani Mee* (Marathi), shares how Smita saw the scene. Bathing publicly under a tap is a fact of life in slums and she did it as part of the narrative. The scene comes immediately after the interval and it is almost over before those out for a smoke or chai and samosas stroll back into the theatre hall. A rather thin argument but let it pass. What really hurt Smita was the blown-up poster all over the city. The director had died before the release (most of the post-production was completed by his assistants, among whom is Kundan Shah of *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* fame). The distributor, without consulting his star, used the poster to draw the crowds in.

There is more to Smita and to *Chakra* than this scene. It has to do with the fatalistic small tragedies that happen in lives struggling for a

foothold. These tragedies are a combination of circumstances and weaknesses that human beings are heir to. Benwa has his boot polish kit, gets married with Looka playing intermediary, and things look rosy. Anna can build his hut in the godown of a factory and Amma is aglow with her pregnancy. But Benwa loses his livelihood, a syphilis-ravaged Looka needs shelter from the police. He hides in Amma's new hut but the cops come, beat up Looka and Benwa, and take them away. Amma has a miscarriage in this melee, and Benwa's young bride is left to cope with this calamitous turn of events. Worse is to come. The factory wants Anna to get off the property; they don't want trouble with the police. Bulldozers raze the frail house of dreams that Amma thinks she had finally got, and the cycle of strife begins all over again. The despair of the damned sees no light at the end of the tunnel. It is more of the same – crime, fear of police brutality, venereal disease, a bastard baby dumped in the garbage, the constant pain of existence dulled by drugs or liquor. The vicious circle goes its inexorable way; people eat and copulate, change sexual partners without much agonizing, young lovers get married and women age prematurely. But life goes on and Amma embodies that life force. It is a life lived without the luxury of privacy, where everything is public, fights and liaisons, drunken brawls and matter-of-fact reconciliations. And bathing at the public tap, with no false modesty.

Chakra spins off so many stories about its making. It offers a glimpse into the very human, endearing side of Smita. Alka Athalye, now a successful star and director of Marathi films with over 200 films to her credit, including the blockbuster *Mahercha Sadi*, got a break into films as a fifteen-year-old. She played Amma's young daughter-in-law though she has barely more than three scenes. Alka was a child actor who had done more than 400 shows on the stage when Rabindra Dharmaraj cast her in his first film. *Chakra* was being shot in January 1981 and Alka had her exams in March. Coming from a middle-class family that lived in Goregaon, she had to argue with her mother who was set against the schoolgirl's acting stint so close to her final exam. Alka admired Smita and would not let go of an opportunity to act alongside her idol. The film was shot mostly at night and Smita would come to the sets after shooting for another film during the day. She was obviously tired, but Alka remembers with wonder how Smita was fully awake the moment the camera was on. It was as if an inner light had been switched on. While the lighting was being set up for the next shot, she would sleep right on the set. This went on for over fifteen days, as Alka recalls.

The most memorable aspect of it all for Alka was Smita's touching kindness towards an overawed young girl. The film was being shot on the sets behind Priyadarshini building (a landmark on the way to

Chembur). Alka was waiting with her mother at around 4 in the morning at the Chembur bus stop, to go to Dadar from where she would take a train back to Goregaon. Smita saw them as she passed by. She reversed her car, picked them up and dropped them at Dadar station on her way back home to Tardeo. She made it a point to drop off Alka and her mother every morning. An overwhelmed Alka says this is where she got her first lesson in humanity and humility; Smita was a big star but 'her feet were so firmly on the ground'. Smita's unaffected behaviour with everyone, be it the raw youngster and fellow actors who were stars themselves, or the spot boys and unit members, knew no hierarchical distinction. What Alka remembers to this day is the 'glow of truth on Smita's face, her eyes'.

Chakra was one of the hits of parallel cinema. Smita later admitted that the notorious bathing scene did exploit her earthy appeal. What is more challenging than the physical exposure is the emotional baring demanded of her. Smita's searing honesty survived the film's voyeurism because she brought out the true grit and courage of a woman who asked so little of life. Smita kept a reserve of surprise and teased you into waiting for that moment. She created this living bridge of tension between the actor and an audience that might be unaware of its own expectations. She unfailingly lived up to expectation and kept this rare connection alive. Sadly, Dharmaraj died before he saw its triumph. *Chakra* fetched Smita her second National Award for Best Actress in 1981.

Reflecting on her second National Award, Smita said in 1984: 'When I got the news that I had won an award for *Chakra*, I was surprised because I never expected an award for that film. I had worked well, but I never expected an award…'

There are many myths and misconceptions around the making of *Chakra*. The most widely prevalent claim being that it was entirely shot in Bombay's slums where Smita went unrecognized. Hitendra Ghosh, the sound recordist, says that they did shoot some scenes in a real slum. It was like a guerrilla shoot, to be done in a quick take before the people there realized what was happening. The actors wore lapel mikes, there was no boom microphone. Microphones were kept in a few huts. He recalls that a scuffle erupted and there was no way it could be controlled, and how it ended up adding authenticity to the scene.

Bansi Chandragupta, the legendary art director of Satyajit Ray's films, erected a set close to the highway and a railway track. It was open land that belonged to the Fertiliser Corporation of India. They were allowed to shoot there for two months. The bulldozers that demolished the slum at the film's end were there to actually clear the land for the factory building to come up.

UMBARTHA *(Marathi), SUBAH (Hindi), 1981: Woman with a Vocation*

She crossed the threshold (umbartha) to reach a new dawn (subah). It is the dawn of finding her vocation in life, however uncertain the future. Sulabha (Savitri in the Hindi version) Mahajan is a quietly inspirational character who has claimed her place in the pantheon of memorable screen women. Smita and Jabbar Patel collaborate on this grave observant film that is so different in form and content from *Jait Re Jait*'s lyricism, animated by its palpable joie de vivre, despite the tragic end.

The acclaimed Marathi version, *Umbartha*, was released earlier. In Hindi, it was able to reach a wider audience, raising crucial questions about the ethos of repression prevailing in our mahilashrams that effectively imprison inmates, shutting out contact with the outside world in the name of protecting them. *Subah*, which was shot simultaneously with the same cast, retains the rooted authenticity of local identity and power-play that operates in a remote, small-town mahilashram where Sulabha takes up her first job. Its ring of authenticity comes from Shanta Nisal's Marathi novel *Beghar* which drew from her personal experience. Vijay Tendulkar edited out more than half the novel with the writer's consent because the writer–director team did not want to dissipate the impact of the many-layered narrative. The novel went on to describe Sulabha's life after she returns home, disillusioned with the traumatizing events at the mahilashram. *Umbartha* ends on the note of an ambivalent paradox – the finality of a decision pitted against uncertainty of the future – for its heroine. She returns home briefly after the first journey to find her vocation but once crossed, the threshold is no longer an impassable barrier to freedom.

We first meet Sulabha, Sulu to the family, as she walks with an air of sullen restlessness, moving desultorily from chair to bench in the well-tended garden of a gracious bungalow breathing old-world charm. Her bearing has an unconscious stiffness, like the starched hand-picked cotton saris she favours. The shot of her profile, eyes somewhat shuttered as if they are wary of giving away her emotions, is arresting. Sulu is deeply thoughtful as she ponders over an envelope she has received. Sulu is a prisoner of futile boredom, the purposelessness of privileged existence. She is visibly aloof from the family's post- dinner chitchat over which her intimidating mother-in-law presides. Sulu's husband, Subhash (Girish Karnad), is a hotshot lawyer. Her brother-in-law, Mohan, is a doctor and his wife is the amiable Maya. This childless older couple dote on Rani, Sulu's five-year-old daughter. Sulu and Subhash are matter-of- fact parents,

careful not to be too indulgent, while Maya accedes to every whim and demand of the pampered child. Subhash casts an admonishing look at Sulu who tries to ignore Rani's tantrums while Maya leaves the dinner table with Rani, placating the little girl.

Something intangible sets Sulu apart from the affluent household that is traditional. It is ruled by the widowed mother- in-law. The forbidding matriarch is also a respected social worker, the kind who is driven to committees and gives orders. It is implied that there is no personal involvement on her part in the work she does with the understated ostentation that belongs to the privileged who take authority for granted. It is authority wielded by an iron hand in a velvet glove. The two grown sons, both successful professionals, defer to their mother while the daughters-in-law hover obediently in the wings, waiting for the matriarch's permission. Sulu's whole demeanour and bearing hint at her underlying restlessness at this rigidly ordered lifestyle. Though Sulu's sense of purposelessness comes through, Jabbar Patel takes pains to show that the other characters are not totally inimical to her aspirations.

The warm bond between Sulu and Maya, who is happy in her domesticity, is real. You get a glimpse into Sulu's sensibility when the rest of the family admires Subhash while he describes his tactics of defending his client, a doctor charged with raping a woman patient. Subhash's ploy is to highlight the woman's marriage to a paralysed man; he wants to prove that she is using a rape charge to make some money. Everybody, including his mother and Maya, seem struck by Subhash's cleverness. It is only Sulu who is shocked and she distances herself by walking away from the convivial group.

Sulu shows Subhash her letter of appointment as the superintendent of a women's reformatory home in a mofussil town 300 kilometres away. No way can she take the job, is his first response. Sulu persists. She has a degree in sociology, Subhash had let her go to Bombay to do a two-year course in social work that she had topped. How can she waste her training and education? The inflexible (for all its soft tone) rule of the patrician mother-in-law expects Sulu to make herself useful in a secretarial capacity to run the many social organizations chaired by her. Subhash understands Sulu's morose dissatisfaction, though exasperation is not far from the surface. Subhash finally speaks up for her during this minor family storm. Maya is only too happy to take care of Rani, in a way allaying Sulu's pangs of parting from her daughter. Jabbar Patel offers no palliative explanations for her dissatisfaction. She is simply a modern, educated woman who is not satisfied with her cushioned life as dutiful daughter-in-law, wife and mother.

The heart of *Umbartha* is Sulu's dismaying introduction to the

institution she is to run under the indifferent yet interfering supervision of a board of trustees comprising a motley collection of mofussil worthies. Tendulkar's skilled dramaturgy in exploring shades of overt and covert violence, the unholy collusion between power players with their own agendas, comes into full play once we enter the Anaath Mahila Ashram (so the board reads). Jabbar uses the forbidding grey iron door with a cut-out entrance, which Sulu has to stoop to enter, to great visual effect. The looming stone walls around her dwarf the purposeful woman who has come to do her best. *Umbartha* is relentless in its stark depiction of the sickening corruption and dehumanizing isolation of the women's home, shut away behind prison-like walls and massive doors. The managing committee is cynical and the wearying human problems of inmates are an inconvenient demand on their time. The perfumed, elegantly coiffed and chiffoned 'Chairman Bai' cannot be disturbed even on the phone, before 9 in the night, the time she returns from her round of partying. Sulu is expected to docilely fall in line.

Along with Sulu, we discover all the major horrors and minor joys, of the inmates. She is a strict disciplinarian who tries to put down the bullying – endemic to such institutions where an unwritten hierarchy prevails – by senior inmates and wardens. Sulu is outraged when she discovers that girls are smuggled out by conniving guards, to keep a clandestine supply chain going. There is also routine pilferage along with cutbacks involving local traders and politicians. Inevitably, Sulu makes an enemy of them.

The horrifying truth about the exploitation of already exploited women achieves documentary authenticity. There are many small heart-breaking stories of the women incarcerated here. Sulu's empathy drives her into active intervention, to do all she can to be fair and help their true rehabilitation. From stern disciplinarian in starched sari who walks briskly through the lines of assembled inmates, with her hands held behind, straightening a slouching shoulder here or patting a back there, Sulu soon elicits their individual stories. They are not cases but each of them is a woman caught in a particular situation. When she tries to write to Subhash after her experience of preventing a possible suicide by a mentally disturbed woman, her expression is grim. Even defeated. She is overwhelmed by the harrowing stories of these women under her charge. There is no help forthcoming from the trustees or outside counsellors. This crucial scene comes after the committee meets to decide the fate of two'recalcitrant' women who refuse to submit to their arbitrary decisions.

She soon sets right the petty tyranny among the inmates but she grows more despondent at the impossibility of communicating desperate problems to the uncaring outside world. One woman is

threatened with forcible return to her old husband from whom she had run away, after she has had a baby by her lover. The lover, meanwhile, has married someone else. Rather than go back to the husband, she kills the child so she will be sent to prison. The incident is narrated, not shown. Another educated woman who has been sent money by her doctor father will be accepted back into the respectable society, only if her child is given away to an orphanage.

After the emotionally exhausting confrontation with the hostile committee, Sulu tries to phone home but the truncated call leaves her trembling on the brink. Loneliness hits her in the gut and her edgy voice as she tells Kamlabai to close the office tells us she is at the end of her tether. Then comes the nightmare. She is running in the dark, the looming barracks close in on her as does the main gate to which she runs in desperation. Her face mirrors fear of an imminent breakdown. She is as much in danger of being a voluntary prisoner as her charges shut up against their will. Is that when duty becomes empathy, unbeknown to herself? That impels her to action.

She takes a decision on her own, to get a girl (technically married to an impotent husband) to her former lover. This brings down the wrath of the socialite chairwoman but Sulu sticks to her guns. Gradually, her work is vindicated – six girls are doing teacher training and seven go into nursing. She is not a kill joy, laying down rules and making them obey her dictates. Sulu knows the joy of celebrating festivals and organizes the Chaitra Gauri puja where she is the guest of honour. She is out of her schoolmarm beige and white saris. Dressed in a bright sari, with matching orange flowers in her hair, she gracefully accepts the ritual filling of her pallu, the oti bharna ceremony. The lilting song,'*Chaand maatla*', accompanies the women's festive celebration, as they dance and pull Sulu into their midst. A pretty young woman sings the ostensibly festive song shot through with erotic longing while her older lover gazes yearningly back at her. This tender affair between two lesbians (done with delicacy, scrupulously avoiding any hint of titillation) becomes the scandalous scoop for the journalist (who is on the managing committee of the mahilashram). The other women who have long suspected the affair waylay the guilty pair and catch them red-handed. They turn viciously intolerant of the'deviant' couple. The committee wants to expel them while Sulu argues that they can be treated – does she mean psychiatry? This sounds crudely regressive now, though the on-screen argument is well-meaning. Sulu is not judgemental. She is only concerned and wants to protect the two women who are reviled and humiliated by other inmates, but all her efforts are futile.

Jabbar's direction underlines the growing warmth between some of the inmates and Sulu. Their vicarious joy and curiosity about

Subhash, when he drives up for a surprise visit, is endearing. And understandable. They line up with some lame excuse or other to see him, ply him with tea and queries of what to cook. Sulu is both embarrassed and understanding. Subhash feels stifled at the intrusions and takes his wife away for a drive, but only after she has changed from her drab schoolmarmish sari for something more colourful. Smita's look throughout is one of a neat bun, bright bindi and not even a trace of lip balm, let alone a discreet touch of lipstick. Simple studs and a thin mangalsutra, an occasional gajra are all that she adorns herself with. Even this tryst with Subhash is interrupted because a young pregnant woman goes into labour when they return from the drive. Sulu stays the night at the hospital as the frail girl bleeds to death before the doctors can intervene surgically. She is shattered and cries herself to sleep in Subhash's arms. But later, when Subhash tries to initiate lovemaking, she stops him, please, not now. He leaves abruptly the next morning, curt and non-communicative. I sympathize but can't share your social awareness and commitment, he frankly admits. The first breach in the marriage is opening up.

Awareness glimmering, Sulu agonizes over it, pouring over the album of happier times while the mournful song '*Soonya soonya*' underscores her loneliness and longing. The visuals cut between black-and-white photographs of them as a couple and then as parents, with flashbacks of happier times in colour. The final image is of Smita's eyes, wellsprings of pain. This was one scene that Smita was apprehensive about. She was present when Lata Mangeshkar recorded the song, and the loneliness that it expressed reduced her to tears. How will we film this, she worried with Jabbar, since she knew how passionate he was about the place of songs in the narrative. The way the director– actor duo filmed it, cutting from Sulu's face to the black-and- white stills, brings out the depth of her alienation.

The height of horror is reached when the police bring back two girls who had run away. They are in pathetically bright cheap nylon saris, a change from the drab ashram regulation mud-coloured, checked cotton one. They are locked up, angry and defiant. Sulu knows that their anger at being brought back to this hellish 'hen coop' runs deep. They set fire to themselves. This incident alienates the board and she is left to face a one- man commission of enquiry, sent from Bombay. The news has raised questions in the legislature.

The enquiry commission scene is a brilliant piece of writing, direction and acting. There is a story behind the way the scene was written and how it was finally shot. Tendulkar's original script mentioned the one-man commission and then cut to her coming home. Jabbar felt this was inadequate, something more was needed. He went to Tendulkar with his misgivings. The writer said, 'Jabbar, this is

cinema, not theatre.' But he was not convinced. Neither was Smita. She went to Tendulkar and he said, 'So you spoke with Jabbar, did you?' Smita argued that if she did not speak out at the enquiry commission, there would be a lacuna in her character. Jabbar had to intervene. He assured Tendulkar,'I will shoot the scene with Sulu speaking out. If you don't like it, we will cut it out.'

'We shot it,' Jabbar recalls.'Tendulkar saw and just nodded. I asked him, "Do you want any dialogue to be cut?" He just remained silent and called out, "Smita. You did wonderful."' He remembers the writer's praise.'Jabbar, it is a wonderful encircling of the character. The camera moves around her. I must tell you it is a good addition.'

The grateful director concedes it was very generous of Tendulkar. 'He was great that way,' he concludes.

Now for the crucial scene that both director and actor insisted on. The bland bureaucrat politely addresses her as Mrs Mahajan and asks if she had personal problems that made her take a job so far from home. The implication? Only a woman who has personal problems – an unsatisfactory marriage or other kinds of domestic strife – will pursue an impersonal issue to such a bitter end. With brusque courtesy, Sulu brushes aside her personal life and launches into all that is wrong with inflexible institutions that shove inconvenient, unwanted women behind walls of confinement. The camera is mostly in close-ups of her face, circling around the stifling room, as she makes her impassioned speech to a phlegmatic man who doesn't show any reaction. Speaking from the heart, she says, 'I feel a connection with these women and I will help change their life.' The words 'I have to find my own identity' are a culmination of her passionate advocacy of a cause that has become personal. As she talks of the self-immolation of the two girls, it is her anguish that speaks: 'They were so angry that if they could, they would have set fire to me as the immediately available symbol of a repressive society.' She is wracked by guilt, feeling complicit in the larger crime. Smita's expressive eyes, the firm line of her lips, the supreme concentration visible on her face, her clear articulation of irrefutable arguments – all of it is nothing less than soul stirring. It goes beyond performance to a sincere reiteration of conviction.

The return home is deliberately low key. She resigns rather than accept suspension. She does not consult her husband while making this decision. Then follows a quiet hiatus as we see her alienation built brick by brick. A spare mise en scène, placing a lonely figure in the large spaces of a home that seems no longer hers, highlighting Smita's eyes, gestures and stance as words become ineffectual. She is treated like a guest in her own home – first, a maid doesn't know who she is, then the very warm Maya makes her welcome and escorts her to her

own bedroom. Rani comes running and humming into the house, freezes on seeing her mother and runs away calling out to her beloved Kaaku. She is wheedled into coming back to Sulu. A cajoling Maya says let's go and see what presents you have got. Sulu kisses her daughter, promising to go out in the evening and buy gifts. Rani's rejection is almost complete now. She has a nightmare and it is Maya who cuddles, comforts and hugs her to sleep.

The reunion with Subhash is no less dismaying. Sulu wears a bright orange sari, brings flowers to the dressing table and puts a jasmine gajra in her hair. Subhash greets her nonchalantly, with just a cold how are you. Asha had informed him of his wife's arrival but he has not rushed back home. Sulu cuts short all talk of what happened at the ashram and lovingly dries his wet back after he has a wash. They are intimate in bed, she is caressing his face, neck, and rests her face on his chest. There is no postcoital bliss for her though. Subhash makes this confession time about the other woman in his life. His justification: 'I was alone and you were away. You can stay and we can go on as before but I can't give her up. Nothing emotional but … you will get used to it and it will hurt less.' It is the cold irrevocability that is the final nail. Sulu curls up in foetal position and cries her heart out at the edge of the bed.

The camera doesn't show Subhash but you next see him waking up, yawning and stretching. Jabbar uses minimal no- fuss dialogue and economy of gestures that are pregnant with significance. Subhash stretches out his hand but doesn't find her. He sees her packing a suitcase.

'Where are you going?'

'I don't know,' is her terse reply.

'Now don't start another adventure,' is his dismissive remark as he takes her clothes out and dumps them back in the wardrobe.

Next, as the rest of the family is gathered for tea in the garden, Rani recites a rhyming poem about a bird that wants to fly away. Sulu stands framed by the window, looking at the family idyll that doesn't miss her at all. The sound of a train in the background overlaps a shot of her face, resolute about her choice. The camera pulls out from the driveway and takes us to a train speeding away. The decision to leave home is minus melodrama.

Sulu is alone in the compartment, initially in longish shots.

The end credits roll, there is a close-up of her in profile, looking out of the window at the passing scenery with hope and curiosity, and the lens freezes on an enigmatic half-smile. This is by far the second most significant freeze in our films after *Charulata*'s famous freeze depicting hands not meeting. The director lets us draw our own conclusions after taking us through two totally different worlds, both

realized with meticulous detail. Smita brings alive a restless woman in search of her own destiny, of a larger commitment to change things in whatever way she can. Is that half-smile bitter? Or faintly hopeful of personal fulfilment? The song in the background is the prayer '*Gagan sadan*' sung in the ashram. The classical raga-based melody becomes the final invocation.

Jabbar Patel as co-producer dared to go against his long-time mentor Vijay Tendulkar on two crucial issues. One was casting Smita and the other, including songs. Tendulkar wanted someone other than Hridaynath Mangeshkar to score the background music. Jabbar is nothing if not passionate about music and songs in his films. He had defied Tendulkar in *Samna* and would do it again in *Umbartha*. Casting Smita is a totally different story.

Jabbar Patel is a lively raconteur and enthusiasm bursts through the staccato of his incomplete sentences. 'Tendulkar was going to cut down three-fourths of the novel and use only one-fourth of it. The writer agreed. I was so charged and electrified, I went to Smita's place. I said, Smita I have something to offer, and narrated the story. She was so thrilled with the narration, she just grabbed my hand and said, I *am* going to do this role! And I said, of course, I have come for that. She said she liked it – you know why, because this is my mother's life.'

Smita saw the essentials of her mother in Sulu, obviously not the details of the marriage and so on. Everyone who knew mother and daughter commented – there is so much of Vidyatai in Sulu! Jhelum Paranjape adds that Smita drew from some elements of Jhelum's mother Sudhatai Varde, another committed social activist.

Jabbar continues, 'Smita warned me, there's no change, na? You are not going to change me, are you? I said, why should I do that? We did *Jait Re Jait* and *Samna* together. We are in the theatre group together. Why should I do that to you? I don't visualize anybody else doing this role at all! I have seen the film through you. Then she threatened me. Look, if there is news in the paper tomorrow that there is a dead body somewhere in Dadar area (I used to stay in Dadar then), if somebody says that's Jabbar Patel's body, I will raise my hand and say I killed him because he did not give me *Umbartha*! She was so much into it. I came to Tendulkar and told him I had narrated the script to Smita. He said, who Smita? I said, Smita Patil. Why, he asked. Because I see her in the main role. Tendulkar asked, you promised her? I said, yes, it was a sort of promise. I don't see anybody else in Marathi cinema doing that role. I had decided to make the film bilingual simultaneously. Do one scene in Marathi and do it in Hindi immediately.

'"You want Smita to do both the roles, he asked. I said yes, she

speaks Hindi. He said,"I have seen her in *Jait Re Jait, Samna* and Shyam's films but anyhow, I differ with you. If you told her, go ahead," he said. Smita knew this. That she was not Tendulkar's first choice. I think that gave her some inner strength: Well, I am not the author's choice, I am the director's choice. She told me, extract the maximum from me. She would discuss a lot. From costumes onwards.'

He can't to this day get over her total involvement. First, the bungalow where the family lived. They looked at four or five bungalows. Jabbar recalls the words of his friend, Bachubhai Mehta, a well-known chemist who had this old Parsi-type bungalow in Khirkee: *Yaar usmein bahut kuch achha hai. Tum bas hamare liye usmein film banado.* 'He did not know what was going to happen to it. Smita went along. I asked, don't you think this is the house? Don't worry, this will be my house, she assured. So with the help of the art director and cameraman, she practically took over. She changed everything in the main hall, choosing the colours, curtains, mattresses, bedcovers, sofas. Then came her clothes, the saris. We went to the market, she'd choose her saris, her own colours. There too, when she is in the ashram, a different sort of sari. The kind of saris and colours she chose for the part as head of the ashram became a big hit with women. It was the look of a very professional woman. The way she wore the sari, her gait, the manner in which she puts her hands behind her. Even the way she stood for the prayer song, it all conveyed authority. It was such huge involvement in the whole thing.'

The casting of the film was crucial. The girls in the ashram came from very different theatre groups. There were no extras as such. Most of them were from Tamasha theatre. A big chunk of wonderful actresses came from the Dalit theatre group. And also from Jabbar's own theatre group. So it was an assorted mix. 'Because I wanted different faces, middle class and others. It was a cross-section of society.' The ashram scenes were shot in a juvenile remand home attached to a jail which housed 400 boys below the age of fifteen, many of them pickpockets.

Jabbar explains:'My cameraman wanted space and a storeyed structure. For each and every shot, the boys had to be removed from there. Here too Smita became so friendly with the kids who were professional pickpockets. One of them told Smita, Tai, we will do something with your purse. "*Chalo, kaise karoge tum?*" she brushed off the dare. But her bag was cut. One boy came with a note, "Tai I did this." She laughed, gave them gifts. She became one of them.'

Jabbar chuckles as he remembers how it was a critical time for her. 'She was also acting with Amitabh Bachchan in *Namak Halaal*. She went to Prakash Mehra and said, Prakash-ji, I have to do this film. On one side is the film with Amitabh and on the other, a film with

Jabbar Patel. A dilemma. Prakash-ji agreed. She shot ten days for Mehra and ten for me, till both films were completed. So she would go from shooting a stern scene in the ashram to the notorious rain song.' The schizophrenic life of an actor can't be more obvious.'I saw that song only when I saw the film,' the director admits.

The freeze on her enigmatic smile was the subject of seminars. Why is she smiling when she is leaving the house? 'All the men were so angry, totally angry with me for the ending of *Umbartha*. I remember when the film was released in Pune's Prabhat theatre. It was the second week, a full house. The rickshawallas don't normally recognize me. I was the last to get out and got into a rickshaw. I was going to the Gymkhana. He asked me,"Sir, have you seen the film?" I said no.' Jabbar has a mischievous smile. The rickshawalla told Jabbar about a couple who argued all the way about the film. 'The man said it was a bad film, the woman said, no, it's the correct film. They fought all the way till they reached the house. He asked me, "What's so special about it? I want to take my wife."'

The response to the film was divided across class lines. Women from the farming community and lower strata admired the film, and the kind of courage Sulu showed. The husband had brought another woman and she had to leave, they argued. Middle-class women were upset at her decision to leave her daughter behind, though they loved the rest of the film. *Umbartha*ran for fifteen weeks, four shows daily, not just in Bombay and Pune but in places like Kolhapur too. Bombay's Plaza theatre had a cap of four weeks but Anna Sahib (V. Shantaram) loved the film and extended it to fifteen weeks, four daily shows. Nagpur was another revelation. The distributor, Mr Rao, also distributed Raj Kapoor's films. He wanted Jabbar to bring Smita along, not just for a standard press conference, he had something else in mind. He wanted to take Smita in an open jeep to the Panchsheel theatre. This for a Jabbar Patel film? wondered the director. Anyway, the two-kilometre stretch to the theatre had people flocking on either side of the road to see Smita.

Umbartha was featured at a festival in Bulgaria where it was para-dubbed.* There were over 3000 in the audience and Jabbar saw teary-eyed women connect to Sulu. 'It's our story, many over-thirty women told me.' She might have lost the National Award that year but it won a totally unexpected accolade from a totally unexpected person. *Umbartha* was screened at the London Film Festival. Someone told Jabbar that Julie Christie was in the audience. 'The show was over. Smita was there to introduce the film but she left for shopping afterwards. Julie Christie came up to me and said, are you the director? Then she asked, has this girl come with you? Can I meet her? I said, wait. We'll have coffee and she should be back by then.

Smita came in. I just said, Smita, somebody wants to meet you. There was no recognition on her part. Julie Christie came up to her and said, Smita, you are a very young girl. Have you seen *Dr Zhivago*? Smita gasped – *Lara*! Julie simply stood up and hugged her. Smita, you were just wonderful, she told her. Smita was absolutely floating on air.'

The ultimate acknowledgement had come earlier.'The rushes were in. You want to show me the rushes, Tendulkar asked. Of course, I want to, I said. There were forty or so people from the unit and Smita sat right back in a corner. After fifteen minutes, I said, let's take a short break for coffee. I was scared. After a hush, he said, "Jabbar, you have beaten me. I don't know why I resisted casting her. It's my life's biggest revelation of an actor. I can't believe this girl did this role! It is beyond my imagination, she has done great! Where is she? Call her." Then he called out to her. "I don't know what happened between you two. I told Jabbar it is a revelation. *Tu mala haravlas, pori*!" (You defeated me, girl!)

'"You … liked me," she said hesitatingly. "No! You were wonderful," Tendulkar said. I can still remember it. She sat beside him, head on his shoulder. Practically a daughter clinging to her father. I saw later that his shirt was completely wet. He also liked that moment of warmth, you know. You visualize a character-based film, about a full-blooded woman. There are so many things happening in her life. She not only visualized the whole thing, she depicted the whole thing, he said. Tendulkar's final praise was,"You have gone beyond my script. This role will be remembered in the film industry for all time."'

No wonder then that *Umbartha* was close to Smita's heart: 'It's my most important role to date. The film deals with women in their own right rather than as appendages to men. It is the first film to tackle the highly sensitive and controversial issues of lesbianism, bride burning and wife beating.'*

'I always have great regard for our major actresses,' Jabbar continues. 'Even Madhuri said, Jabbar, one *Umbartha* for me! Tabu pleaded, yaar Jabbar, make something like *Umbartha*. *Kuch banao na*. She loved the film and Smita. When her DVD of the film got stuck, she called me. I had to ask the dealer to send her another copy.'

ARTH *(1982): Brave Woman on the Verge*

Only when an actor is totally confident of her craft, of the ability to give her intense best, will she take on the role of 'the other woman', the home-breaker. Smita courted the challenge. Bravely so. Not only is she pitted against Shabana, her arch rival, but Shabana has the author-backed role that is guaranteed to gain public sympathy for the betrayed wife with whom millions of women will identify. Mahesh

Bhatt pulled off the casting coup of his career in *Arth*. His best films are unapologetically autobiographical. He delves into the messy depths of his complicated relationships to create films that may look like an orgy of emotional excess at first sight. But there is a core of truth in the way he holds up the most difficult relationships to unsparing light and exposes ravaged emotions without flinching from inflicting pain. On himself and those close to him. The process could be cathartic for him, and as for the viewer, the moot question is – does it make emotional voyeurs of us all?

Some might call this emotional scavenging, even exhibitionism. All creative endeavours are autobiographical at the core. The difference is in the distance, a certain objectivity that the film-maker creates in portraying a personal truth. At his honest best, Mahesh Bhatt succeeds in making the personal into riveting drama that stands by itself. But a public life cannot escape references to real-life parallels, more so when the film- maker revels in exposing, not disguising, what happened to him. If *Janam* and *Zakhm* expose the angst of 'illegitimacy' that stigmatized his youth, in *Arth* he lays bare the break-up of his marriage and the tortured relationship with a mentally unstable Parveen Babi. *Arth* draws the parallel arc of two women who are in love with an irresolute coward. The rejected wife claws her way to inner strength and independence while the high-profile, emotionally fragile other woman goes to pieces with unresolved guilt.

Knowing fully well that Shabana was to play the central role of Pooja, the simple homemaker betrayed by Inder's (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) affair, Smita challenged herself to play Kavita Sanyal, the schizophrenic film star. She was offered the role of the sympathetic Bai whose own marriage to an alcoholic drunk creates another parallel of an exploited woman. Shabana is on record that Smita was to do the role that was finally done by Rohini Hattangadi. Smita told Mahesh Bhatt that she wanted to play Kavita and this necessitated enlarging a role that was originally a small one. According to Lalita Tamhane, Smita was fed up of playing the same old oppressed working- class woman. She was perhaps determined to test her limits.

There is this revealing insight from Patricia Bosworth's book on Jane Fonda. The author was with Jane Fonda at Actors Studio and after ten years on Broadway, went on to become a journalist and well-known biographer. Jane Fonda told her biographer: 'The weird thing about acting is that you get paid for discovering you have multiple personalities.'

It is Kavita's fractured personality that Smita brings to painful life with extraordinary conviction, drawing us into her darkest fears and deepest needs. Whatever may be Smita's route to Kavita, Mahesh Bhatt claims:'She was always my original choice. There was never any

hesitation in casting for the film the way it was originally conceived. There was a kind of electricity that was hardwired in her. It made her ideal to play that part which required a psychotic woman on the edge. The references could not be rooted from other movies but it was from my own life. I had lived with a woman like this and Smita came close to a woman on the edge. Living a life of uncertainty, probing but not finding answers, or enduring love. Immersed in the business of entertainment, of appearances, the dichotomy between appearance and reality, it was the defining aspect of her personality that was visible. It was there in Smita's appearance that flaunted her achievements in the seminars attended by the who's who. In private, she was the same woman who mined the uncertainties that many women face – that being the essence of *Arth*. This was what made her so right for the role.'

Bhatt implies that Smita was experiencing a similar conflict, between her public image as the poster woman of parallel cinema's serious intent and the private person who was torn by her love for what a judgemental society would call the wrong man, because he was married and had two children. He maintains that he could see those contradictions in Smita. 'Of the screen image of a woman with gravitas, the earthy middle-class woman, peasant … that was the prescribed cinema. The kind of cinema that we pretend to bow down to, with reverence. I see that cinema as different kind of a fairy tale, where the perfect woman had all the answers … the economic problems … creating the myth that if the economic concerns were solved, everything was solved. There was no evidence that allowed me to see it that way … whether it was the kaamwali bai who worked through the day and later got beaten up by her drunk of a husband. Similarly with the affluent woman and her search for love, for self-realization. There was no self-realization or gratification because self-realization needed an agency outside. God or a man. You are in a trap.'

It is a moot point if Smita drew from this perceived real-life experience to her interpretation of Kavita. Or is it Mahesh Bhatt dispensing existential philosophy as is his wont? Is the truth an ambivalent mix of both points of view? Jabbar Patel said Smita confided (to his utter dismay) that she was in love with Raj Babbar at the start of *Umbartha*'s shoot. That was much before *Arth*. It is all plausible conjecture and she is not here to speak for herself. What really matters is how intensely she internalized a far more complex role that hardly has any precedents in our cinema.*

For all the tremendous conviction that Shabana brought to Pooja, the trajectory of her growth is linear, creating immense empathy. Kavita takes us on a disturbing rollercoaster of emotions. When she is

on the screen, we just can't look away from her wounded eyes. Her brittle body language makes you anxious that she will snap and shatter to pieces any minute. We unconsciously lean forward to catch her husky whisper and every quiver of emotion in her compelling voice. Smita makes us want to know what drives her to the edge, why she is so obsessed with Inder, how deeply she is afraid that he will leave her. She is ruthless in her need to possess Inder and thinks she can salve her conscience by giving him the money to buy Pooja the home she so craves to own. Kavita's overwhelming passion and playful tenderness leaves Inder helpless. He is her emotional security blanket – Kavita tells her mother over the phone that she feels so safe with Inder, as safe as she had felt with her Papa. Her voice goes half an octave higher, as if she needs to shrilly affirm to her mother that this new man is her anchor in life. Her man is lover and surrogate father figure too. No man, especially one who feels guilty at betraying his wife, can meet so many demands. Kavita's need is poignant, urgent and blindly self- centred.

Bhatt creates a different space for Kavita's scenes. There are long takes, very few cutaways when Kavita and Inder are together, whether making passionate love or enjoying postcoital intimacy.

Smita is uninhibited. Her desire-fuelled eyes invite him to drown in their depths. Her gestures are sudden and surprising. She bites Inder's finger caressing her lips, takes a drop of his sweat and sucks her finger, scorching the scene with heated spontaneity. One long take follows another. They are wrapped in sheets, seated across each other, their profiles in silhouette while Kavita imagines how their child will look, how they will grow old together. The moment of happiness is so fragile, with Kavita expecting so much from it, that we fear its ephemerality. That is what makes Kavita so poignant even after we have experienced Pooja's overwhelming joy in her own house at last.

Most of Pooja's scenes are with other people. They are small and intimate. It is as if she is creating and searching for connections with others. That defines her essential humanity, her warmth. So when she is abandoned, her pain smites you like a sharp scimitar. Kavita is isolated in her marbled mansion with its stark decor. 'That is one of the best things I could get … the contradictions of space,' confirms Bhatt.

He underlined the threat of suicide with a huge black-and- white poster of Marilyn Monroe on the landing against which Smita played out scenes of rage and distress beyond bearing. Another sly hint that Inder's marriage is going through the seven-year itch (Pooja mentions that they have been married for seven years).

Bhatt explains why the scenes with Kavita are filmed in that particular way and the shades of grey in the mise en scène. 'Spatially,

I wanted to keep her in that desolate opulent space. Not cluttered, but where there is a kind of emptiness. She looked desolate in that space.' About her quicksilver changes of mood, he says:'That is the seesaw of emotions. People who have bipolar ailment are vulnerable to this biological malaise. They have these mood swings. Smita understood it. It was a pleasure to work with her. It was a brilliant extension of the fire that was there in me. That was a moment of catharsis. She was the vehicle through which one exorcized a buried dark space.' About the long takes, he has his reasons: 'It is a sort of timeless space, for what is perceived as sin. You wanted both in an interrupted sort of space. She was the kind of actor who would just become that entity. She brought a lot of inner journey into that scene. She wanted a baby, that's what she pined for. I can still remember her looking at him, of her dream of spending her life with him, growing old together. It was a very sincere performance.'

Casting Smita challenged Bhatt to revisit his tumultuous relationship and widen the narrative ambit to explore Kavita's neurosis. *Arth* is still the story of how Pooja, an orphan who is emotionally, financially dependent on Inder, goes through the trauma of rejection. She gradually gathers the tattered cloak of self-worth after discovering the strength to live by herself. The essence of *Arth* is Pooja's journey into finding herself and Shabana's once-in-a-lifetime performance resonated with a whole generation of Indian women. Finding herself had not yet become a feminist cliché in the early 1980s. The film is more than India's *An Unmarried Woman* (Paul Mazursky's ironic, sometimes humorous 1978 film on a divorced woman finding her self-worth, starring Jill Clayburgh). Kavita brings a new dimension to the story and underlines the extreme fragility of relationships under the weight of mental illness. This makes *Arth* a landmark even after thirty years. Films about a middle- class woman carving out her own destiny, growing out of societal and culturally sanctioned need for male support, are no longer a rarity in our cinema. It is almost yet another'progressive' formula.

But the portrayal, stripped of sanitizing sentimentality, of an unstable woman's search for absolute love is such a challenge to an actor's ability and courage that there has not been another Kavita in our films. Smita bared her soul and depths of vulnerability to portray a woman who has to struggle to find acceptance from an audience that is rooting for Pooja. In the few, carefully designed and insightfully written scenes, Smita sucks you into a vortex of teeming emotions. She is implacable, hard and unreachable – a large mirror reflects that cold, withdrawn mask – when Pooja begs her on the phone to give Inder back to her. Bhatt reveals that this scene was added later. 'My sister who had come to the preview said I don't think

the wife has done everything to save her marriage. I asked, what should she do? She said Pooja should beg her. Then it struck me that she had tried almost everything but there is something more she could do. So I shot Shabana in close-ups and Smita was rightly put in her make-up room when she looks hard at herself … it is amazing. She had to bring that cold, almost brutal side. I thought that was very important.'

Kavita's ruthless ultimatum to Inder, tell Pooja about me, or I will, is delivered with deadly finality. Ruthlessness and agonizing fear; they are the alternating extremes of the emotional scale. She is often hysterically afraid – Inder mumbles Pooja's name when he wakes at his usual departure time after a night with Kavita.'A wife is a wife is a wife,' she rants, her voice hissing with helpless pain and angry accusation. She might not make you care for her but you want to know what drives her to this brink of desperation.

Bhatt summarizes: 'Smita was a sponge. She just absorbed. She would just look at you, inhale you and add something, bring up a cocktail. It became a deadly cocktail. Why she became so extraordinary in *Arth* was because she was living that life simultaneously. She would come looking tired in the morning and sort of relive the aftershocks of private misery … then she would get into the cinematic space and exhale the essence of what was captured in those scenes. You could not leave an impact like that without being there. She was in that space.'

Bhatt plays fair. He gives both his women two tremendously explosive scenes. The first is Pooja at the party where she just explodes at Inder, with Kavita in a black and gold dress, hair up in a smart chignon, clinging to his arm. Kavita is the star yet she is the classic clinging ivy in public. In contrast, Pooja wears a silver grey unembellished sari, a lone marauder venting her grief and rage. She rounds off her tirade about all that a woman is supposed to be, with *bistar mein randi* (a whore in bed). Those words, distorted deliberately, echo and re-echo in Kavita's minimally stark mansion. It drives Kavita to swallowing sleeping pills. It is an enormous physical struggle for Inder to make her spit them out. She fights like a cornered animal.

When Smita gets her big cathartic moment, she is magnificent. Kavita's breakdown is the most remembered scene. Bhatt says: 'The physical gesture was pulled out from memory – that was Parveen Babi's. As is the anguish she felt, that she was suffering, the guilt that was tearing her.' The director's reference point might be Parveen Babi. What happens on screen is Smita at her most ravaged intensity. You see her sitting on the sofa, a small mirror in hand, touching her face as if examining it minutely, humming softly to herself. She is composed when Pooja enters, bids her sit down politely. When Pooja enquires

how she is, the dam bursts. Haunted eyes in a gaunt face, agitatedly walking in her black kaftan, Kavita's composure unravels before our riveted eyes. She comes and sits by Pooja, both their faces in profile. Her words come out in abrupt sharp bursts. Those agonized words are burnt into memory when she accuses Pooja of deliberately, stealthily coming into her house and crying … crying that only she can hear. 'Do I look mad to you,' she asks with the deadly calm that presages a storm.

She walks away, and thrusts the offending sheets at Pooja, berating her for coming between Inder and her in bed. There are long takes of Smita's agitated pacing, with brief cutaways to Pooja's quiet, compassionate face. Smita's voice is like a whiplash: don't you feel any shame to sleep beside another woman's husband? Notice how she insinuates that Inder is her husband and Pooja is the interloper. The lashing voice quickly turns into an agonized, whispered cry, as she talks of the mangalsutra's scattered beads pricking her feet, her voice breaking when she says how tired she is of cleaning it up all day and night. Finally, she brings an imaginary bead in a hand extended to Pooja. Then comes the remorse, as she sits at Pooja's feet, asks for forgiveness with hands folded. And the confession: I loved Inder, not your husband. I wanted to make a home, not break yours.

Shabana sits quietly and generously lets Smita give the scene her all. You can watch this scene again and again, marvelling at the calibrated emotions pouring out of Smita. You get goose flesh every time. Lalita says it was a one-take shoot. Remember, it was also in sync sound. Hitendra Ghosh, working with Bhatt for the first time, convinced him to go for the matchless spontaneity that sync sound offers. Ghosh recalls that they had to dub only one dialogue of Shabana's. Bhatt sums up: 'It is ironic how they have the same dream and harm each other. It is a tragic scene. The kind of understanding that life has given them in small pieces.'

Smita transformed that small piece of insight into something unforgettable that is so uniquely Smita and yet so different from most of her roles. No wonder she would not brook any criticism of *Arth*, as she wouldn't of *Umbartha*. Two very different roles, so diametrically different in their intent and style, and both closest to her heart.

Manya, the kid sister who studied fashion design in New York, did the costumes for Smita. Except for one scene where she is in a translucent orange dress, Smita's dusky skin stands out against unadorned white, grey and black. Her minimal make-up and muted colours give her the sophisticated look. This look also defines her final, lucid decision when she clearly throws Inder out of her life. It is like a shipwrecked person reaching a safe haven of rationality – however brief – and deciding she needs no unreliable anchor.

Bhatt was of course aware of the rivalry between his two actors and subtly needled them to outdo each other. Smita had two National Awards to Shabana's one at this juncture. Shabana went on to win a heap of awards for *Arth*, including her second National Award after *Ankur*. Speaking of the two actors, Bhatt says:'Shabana had a longer career to redefine the Indian woman on screen. After *Arth* she got a new identity. She was an aspirational figure for so many women. She used what the virtual world had given her, used the momentum to craft a place in the real world.

'Smita was besieged by her own problems. She made an unusual place for herself in parallel cinema. *Subah* was an excellent film she did. Her appearance in *Aakrosh* was stunning. Take Smita out of *Arth* and there is not much left. I am so proud of the work these two women did in it. They were India's greatest actors. Not only for the craft but the ability to be so honest, learning from their experiences and hanging in there with the writers' and directors' help … that is why even thirty years later, *Arth* remains a very important film. Time is the only critic, if you ask me. There is something in there which makes it timeless. The narrative leaps out of the screen and touches you.'

You can only agree with a justifiably proud director.

An interesting postscript is Shabana's take on *Arth* from today's perspective.

'It was Smita who wanted to play Kavita. I think *Arth* was changed because Smita was cast in that part.You had to obviously justify her presence and so you had to give more scenes to her. The story is quite clearly Pooja's. Actually, in the narrative, Kavita should come in only where she directly affects Pooja's life.' About showing Kavita's schizophrenic side, Shabana has this to say: 'That was also Mahesh Bhatt's whole experience at that particular time. I thought Smita was very good in that role. She brought in all the insecurities, all that fragility of her experience, and there was tremendous truth to the playing of that role. But today, if I saw *Arth*, I would wish that the other woman had not been shown only in the negative light that it did. In today's time and understanding, it could have been a more rounded character. There is one scene where she speaks to me: Why are you entering my dreams? Why are you casting your mangalsutra at me? I do nothing. I am just looking at her with compassion. Smita was very good in that scene.'

Arth is a triumph for two women who, even though they were arch rivals, have this rare sensitivity to understand each other.

BAZAAR *(1982): Selling Women, Their Dreams and Souls*

Bazaar breaks the archaic mould of the Muslim social, Hindi cinema's

highly romanticized depiction of nawabi culture with all its stereotypical accoutrements in place: chandeliered mansions, bejewelled beauties behind silken curtains, courtly, soulful lovers spouting shayari. The formula caters to a collective, self-deceiving yearning for lost nawabi glory. Very few films have dared to probe contemporary problems. *Bazaar*, written and directed by Sagar Sarhadi, ranks with *Garm Hawa*, in its uncompromising depiction of the reality of Muslim life in India. Sarhadi's film comes nowhere near the distilled poignancy of *Garm Hawa*, but it is driven by a crusading urge to expose the flesh trade that goes on under many guises in an impoverished Muslim community, caught between a nostalgic past and the harsh reality of contemporary economic backwardness. An avowedly feminist film, it focuses on the plight of Muslim women from poor families as well as those still clinging pathetically to a nawabi lifestyle and feudal values. In presenting the life of two women Najma (Smita) and Shabnam (Supriya Pathak), Sarhadi implies that women are the cheapest commodity bought and sold in a society, chained by religion and crushed by poverty.

Sagar Sarhadi, short-story writer, playwright, screenplay writer, was weary of churning out romances (all huge hits) for the likes of Yash Chopra and others. A committed socialist who lives a life of spartan simplicity, he decided to make a film from the heart. Sarhadi speaks of the genesis of *Bazaar*: it sprang from a prolonged encounter with a young Muslim woman whose flat was something of an adda for like-minded writers and people who appreciated literature. She was living with a man who had promised marriage but did not get round to it because of a variety of reasons – financial, familial and a weak will. Salim the poet/writer, played by Naseeruddin Shah, is an alter ego for Sarhadi, who voices his critique of religion, tradition and the hypocrisy of society that commodifies women. Allied to this was the media furore after the Ameena story came to light. Amrita, the observant air hostess, saw something amiss in the fourteen-year-old girl from Hyderabad travelling with a sixty-something Arab to whom she was ostensibly married. Sarhadi fictionally combined this regressive practice born of poverty with the experiences of a vivacious yet lonely woman he had met and befriended. He had come to know her background and the many reasons that led to her demi monde life.

Najma is an early rebel born into a family that is ready to sell her into genteel prostitution. The mother claims that theirs is a family that has always had a retinue of servants and it is unthinkable for a daughter to work. '*Nawabi chali gayee magar nawab rah gaye*,' are words of lament and implicit pride in the past. It is Najma's mother who articulates the problem families like theirs face. The father and brothers are idlers. The uncertain beginning and rather ambiguous

explanation suggest that this dark-eyed beauty, whose seeming reticence promises intensity, is being groomed for the highest bidder. She is loved by the poor, idealistic poet Salim whose visits are unwelcome to the mother, wary of wagging tongues. Najma doesn't reciprocate Salim's love but defies her mother and the rules of purdah to meet a poet she genuinely admires.

The film's weak link is Najma's feelings for Akhtar (Bharat Kapoor), the outsider from Bombay. Najma is stifled in Hyderabad, dreading her fate as a possible mistress of some rich man. Akhtar is different from the men she meets in a city where girls from impoverished shareef families are neither allowed to work, nor are they in a position to make a decent marriage without dowry. He seems more liberated and offers her an uncertain freedom. She runs away with him to Bombay. The unexpected freedom of the big city – seen as an escape from the oppressive feudalism and genteel shabbiness of Hyderabad – turns out to be not only a mirage but alienating and corrupting as well. Akhtar is a smooth opportunist, financially dependent on his family, and keeps Najma as his mistress in a friend's flat. Promise of marriage someday is what keeps the tenuous relationship going and it preys on Najma. She lives in hope of their relationship being legitimized. In the meantime, she plays cheerful hostess to a group of friends who are regulars at her house. The partying picks up when Shakir Bhai comes home from the Middle East on one of his periodic visits. The flat they live in belongs to Shakir Bhai.

Smita's look is a fetching mix of old world tehzeeb and modernity. Her kohl-lined eyes, face framed by carefully twirled ringlets, bright lipstick and flowing gharara for the party scene contrasts with her slinky nightie when she is with Akhtar. Her demeanour is cheerful and she dances, swaying decorously at the welcome party for Shakir Bhai. Other friends gently tease her for living in sin and she gives a practised laugh but she can't hide her wary anxiety from the observant Salim. He works as a journalist and his sharp eyes see past Najma's façade. Salim has always had his suspicions of Akhtar. He knows Najma doesn't reciprocate his love. Yet he values her friendship, cautions her repeatedly and always wishes her well. Najma tells him rather playfully:'*Sochna aapka pesha hai. Aapka achcha nahi kar sakti to aapka bura bhi nahin kar sakti*.' For all her apparent commitment to Akhtar, there is a hint of something more, a possibility, in her relationship with Salim.

Shakir Bhai is estranged from his wife and sons. A middle- aged roué, his sojourn in the Middle East has sharpened his taste for rejuvenating virginal flesh. He wants to marry and start a new family with a young girl from Hyderabad – someone like you, he says

suggestively to Najma. He entrusts Najma with the task of finding a suitable bride from her hometown where poverty has forced many Muslim families to look towards the Middle East for a nikah minus the dowry. Najma's gnawing insecurity drives her to return to Hyderabad six years after she had snapped all ties with her family. She heads a foraging party hunting for nubile virgins. Salim too is part of the group, a curious observer who maintains a distance from the rest. Najma is initially reluctant, but being a hard-headed realist, she knows she can't afford scruples if she wants to legitimize her relationship with the evasive Akhtar. The shattering reality of Hyderabad, where impoverished parents grovel, beg and thrust their daughters at any prospective groom, horrifies her. The awakening of Najma's quiescent conscience runs parallel to memories of home, the pain of parting from her mother. Her disquieting conscience and self-interest are at war, but she doesn't let others see the quiet conflict raging within.

Once in a way, she lets her caustic tongue speak her mind: 'The cheapest thing in your bazaar is a woman.' Salim's poetic imprecations and bitter railing continue to undermine her determination to put her own security first. Najma finds the courage to visit her mother. She does not want anyone to accompany her. '*Yeh ruswai main khud sehloongi*,' she affirms. Her mother timorously asks her to stay back. I have crossed the dehleez (threshold), so I cannot return, is Najma's clincher. She has made peace with the past and determines to continue on the path she once chose.

Najma goes ahead with the hypocrisy of the marriage, arranged between the ageing lecher and the dewy-eyed fifteen- year-old Shabnam. The bargaining over terms is sickening. The belated discovery that Shabnam loves Sajid (Farooque Sheikh) shatters her. The lovable, innocent Sajid, whom she had always regarded her own brother, has abandoned studies and plies a rickshaw for a living. Her guilt at destroying the fragile dreams of this heart-breaking pair is papered over by necessity. She goes ahead with the pre-wedding rituals with forced cheer. Shabnam's suicide on her wedding night – the only form of protest available to her – is the deathblow. Najma can't live with her lacerated conscience. And there is yet another train journey – this time with Salim.

For, at last, Najma's innate integrity has reasserted itself. The time for moral evasions is over. Vague resentments and half-hearted rebellion must end. Smita essays the cold fury of Najma's resolve with the bitter self-knowledge that she had played the procuress. Anger – at Akhtar's moral cowardice and her own complicity – crystallizes into rejecting his belated offer of marriage that is stained with the blood of an innocent. Najma realizes that true freedom lies in standing on her

own feet. Dependence on a man like Akhtar makes her part of a rotting system. Smita's sincerity and commitment to a role that has negative undertones are never in doubt. What is remarkable is the way she shares with us Najma's journey into self-knowledge; she implicates us in her guilt and impels us to seek atonement.

Bazaar has many flaws, of overblown rhetoric and underwriting Najma's early years. The screenplay is uneven and the songs, beautiful in themselves, are filmed in a style that is dated. The Hyderabadi dialect (for which there was a local coach) is not consistently spoken. Najma has outgrown her native Daccani now that she is in Bombay. Smita's performance fills out some of the gaps and redresses the balance. How do you cleanse your conscience when you have allowed iron to enter the soul? Smita's performance asks the question implicit in the film's denouement.

Casting Smita as Najma caused a minor storm in the media, eager to smell controversy. Sarhadi affirms that Shabana wanted the role. I am a Muslim and have Hyderabad connections (through her mother Shaukat Azmi) is an argument Shabana considered irrefutable. But Sarhadi was set on Smita. She had become popular in mainstream films after establishing her brilliant credentials in parallel cinema. Sarhadi talks admiringly of her 'saawlapan' as one of the deciding factors. His Najma was not the fair, simperingly coy heroine of Muslim socials. She had to have a hard veneer, cultivated to cover up her vulnerability. Only then would her awakened conscience make an impact.

Sarhadi found Smita open and eager to imbibe the Hyderabadi ethos. Her sincerity and simplicity were endearing. While the film was being planned, she would often drop by and forage for simple vegetarian food, borrow books and unselfconsciously lie down on the divan and take a nap. This was a busy time when she was working in so many films.

Sarhadi shot the film on a shoestring budget and faced many money problems. Smita asked for her payment, Rs 25,000, rather hesitantly because she was in the process of buying her flat. He understood and arranged for the money, for which Smita was really grateful. She knew how tough the situation was.

There is another sidelight to the shooting of *Bazaar*. Smita had the largest room in the modest hotel in which the actors were booked. When she found that Shaukat Azmi was given a small room, Smita immediately insisted that the senior actor, Shabana's mother at that, shift to the larger room and she herself shifted to the smaller. Shabana generously tells this story, to underline the grace and courtesy in relationships, even if she and Smita were constantly pitted against each other, scrambling for the same roles.

TARANG *(1984): Mother Courage*

One would hardly expect an exponent of purist cinema, a director who had mostly worked with non-actors in highly stylized narratives, to choose an actor who was synonymous with neo- realistic films. For his most accessible yet consciously wrought epic, *Tarang*, Kumar Shahani cast the parallel cinema icon as the heroic Earth Mother/Mother Courage figure. Smita was also well established in mainstream cinema by this time but that did not deter Shahani while translating an ambitious vision into a linear structure, with nuggets of sub-stories embedded as part of a diegetic narrative. He actually uses his two main stars, Smita and Amol Palekar, to occasionally remind viewers that they are actors playing the roles written into an epic thesis unfolding before us. Choosing to expand cinematic language to encompass a contemporary epic form allows Shahani to subvert the all-engrossing quality of film as a medium with Brechtian moments of alienation. It is to remind us that we are watching a spectacle the market uses to lull mass audiences into becoming passive consumers. What he demands of us is to see the spectacle as a metaphor to portray and critique a reality that resonates beyond the frame. An epic engages us at many levels of reality and actors need to not only respect the director's intent but also participate in his deliberated acts of both subversion and invocation of mythic associations.

For such a complex, even unfamiliar endeavour, an actor not only needs to trust her director but also bring her own emotional intelligence and intellectual understanding to playing the narrative's anchor. Janaki is the central figure that connects *Tarang*'s two worlds. *Tarang* explores the problems of labour in a capitalist society where wealth accumulation and profit are the only motive. The world of labour is faction-riven with its own internal conflicts. The industrialist family has its dissensions, deceptions and power struggles. The link between the diametrically opposed worlds is Janaki, the widow of a slain labour leader who comes to work for the factory owner's family.

The very name Janaki (Smita) resonates. She is of this earth but also a princess and queen who has endured exile, abduction and rejection, finally embracing the womb of the earth mother. This analogy does not mean that we are meant to read direct parallels with Sita of the Ramayana. Far from it. This woman is all flesh and blood, fiercely committed to the cause of workers' rights but pragmatic enough to use and be used by the class enemy for personal survival and to help the larger cause. She is neither meek nor submissive. In fact, we hear her strong voice spewing abuses before she strides into the frame. Yes, stride. Most of the time, when you see her in motion, she strides purposefully. When she is still, she is a sculpted figure,

often sitting on the ground, as if she owns it even when she has not a paisa or a roof over her head.

Tarang bears out what Arun Khopkar said of Smita's body language. Talking of her trust in the script and director, specifically of Kumar Shahani, Khopkar takes a ruminative pause and says: 'There is this other thing. About her body. There is a kind of openness – of the people from the place she comes from, Dhule … spending time there and coming from her background, there is something like a rural person's body language. Like a chilli that gives flavour and taste, there is something about her body language that gives an emphasis to her (persona); it is not like overacting. Just a stress and rhythm, very beautiful and something very non-urban.' (This coming from an aesthetician who made a film on a classical dancer and genres of music.)

Shahani uses this pliancy of Smita's body language, her ability to suggest an inner life, to add fluidity to a carefully plotted melodrama unfolding at many levels. Janaki comes to the company office, stridently demanding her late husband's dues and a job. Her husband had led a movement against the management and was killed by Sethji's (Dr Shriram Lagu) henchmen. Janaki is considered a nuisance and soon, she is thrown out of her hut in the labour slum where she is feared, admired and gossipped about. Sethji's right-hand man is his son-in-law Rahul (Amol Palekar), a suave schemer whose soft- spoken conciliatory manner and cautious liberalism hides his ruthless ambition to take complete control of the business that still runs on the old man's diktat. His elegant and aloof wife, Hansa (Kawal Gandhiok), is concerned only about her father's failing health. Having provided the heir, she increasingly distances herself from Rahul. Rahul's biggest rival is Dinesh (Girish Karnad), Sethji's nephew who is based abroad and wants to import foreign machinery. Rahul poses as the champion of indigenous manufacturing and succeeds in scuttling Dinesh's plans with the help of a few insiders, including Sethji's confidential secretary Anita (Rohini Hattangadi) who is also his occasional paramour. Shahani, an avowed Marxist, foresees the coming battle between advocates of globalization and Indian entrepreneurs who have benefited from a closed economy.

A dispossessed Janaki ends up being employed in Sethji's mansion as nursemaid to the young grandson. Hansa, seeing how the little boy has grown close to Janaki, withdraws even further and tacitly pushes Rahul into a sexual relationship with Janaki. There is an ambiguous texture to this relationship. Has Janaki – who has sold her body on occasion when starving, has gradually given up her nav-vari sari for the regular drape and longingly feels the rich texture of Hansa's silk saris and jewellery – subtly seduced Rahul? Or is it an unspoken

mutual attraction, a calculated gambit on her part and succumbing to need on his? Shahani leaves it open. Yet, there is just a suggestion of emotion – Rahul touches Janaki's face with unexpected tenderness after they have slept together. Her hand, curled on the sheet, slowly moves away to the unseen Rahul and the camera captures every emotion on her face, where pleasure is almost pain.

Yet, Janaki maintains her distance. She refuses the money Rahul offers – don't make me fall so low, is her initial pained response. Gradually, she is a self-appointed mole spying on the enemy to help the cause and people she believes in. Janaki becomes an accomplice of Rahul's carefully executed plan to hasten the death of the old man who is being nursed at home. Dinesh is totally side-lined and discredited though he accuses Rahul of killing his uncle. Through all this, Janaki grows in confidence, listens to Rahul's phone conversation, takes the upper hand in the relationship and demands money that she gives to Abdul, the young labour leader who is in love with her. '*Khubsoorat, khush mijaz aurat*' is how he describes Janaki and ruefully tells her he can't find another like her to marry.

Shahani has carefully interspersed references to films and of his characters being stars playing these roles. Smita in a red sari walks alone along the sea. A little later, when she is framed against a shop window, a bystander says: look, that's Smita Patil. Rahul is at a restaurant with friends and two people nearby discuss Amol Palekar's first film *Rajnigandha*. The most unexpected reference is to *Devdas*. Smita is in a Victoria and the man sitting by her slides into her lap. The drunk asks,'*Aur kitni door jana hai, gaadiwale*?' The actors have to remain impassive, for these tricky references to be effective. Smita looks like a statue carved in stone, only the red of her sari hinting at flamboyance.

Shahani adds yet another layer. Smita's interaction with Hansa – they are so physically different from each other – sometimes transcends the mistress and maid divide, to suggest a deeper recognition of each other as women. Hansa remarks, women are deep, like rivers. As if they secretly agree that their intuitive knowledge is something men can't fathom. This adds a sense of mystery to the narrative that is proceeding to its ambiguous denouement.

Rahul sends Janaki and his son away to his bungalow in Lonavala ostensibly to shield her from police investigation. Hansa is found dead in the bathtub after making love with her husband. This leaves Rahul in total control, after trying to divide the union along communal lines. Abdul is targeted by the conniving police and he runs away to a tribal village with a few of his followers. He visits Janaki in Lonavala for a final goodbye. Janaki brings such tenderness to this scene, as if she knows they may not meet again. Rahul now has no use for Janaki who

receives him with flowers in hair, kajal in her eyes. He sends her off and we see her walking down the ghat road with a bundle of clothes. Janaki ends up at the hut of Namdeo (Om Puri), another acolyte of her late husband. The huts are gutted in an explosion, Janaki runs, and the final image is of dawn on a long bridge where Janaki is the divine apsara Urvashi in a floating white sari, a lotus bud in her hair, walking away from a dark-suited Rahul who wants her to be with him. Ashish Rajadhyaksha sums up: 'Janaki becomes the elusive voice of history. Accusing Rahul of trying to manipulate what he never understood, she claims the forces of change to be "faster than the fleeting wind". This sequence replays lines from the Urvashi-Pururavas legend of the Rig Veda as analysed by the historian D.D. Kosambi in his book *Myth and Reality*.'

This fusion of earthy sensuousness and epic resonance in the person of Janaki, of dichotomies so harmoniously contained, is inspirational. Shahani consciously explored the epic dimensions of the Earth Mother, conscience keeper and mythic archetype of Urvashi, the celestial seductress, to enrich the context of class struggle in a capitalist society. A working-class Janaki is desired by the suave industrialist as much she is loved by the principled proletariat. She can have an affair with the former and yet retain the core of moral integrity. Smita calibrates, in mutually enforcing measures, dignity and compassion, intelligence and objectivity. There is passion for justice but not hatred for taking revenge, neither personally nor for her class.

The reclusive, scholarly Shahani and Smita shared a very unlikely, playful friendship. Shahani remembers Smita sitting on the floor of his flat, beside the divan, and regaling him with gossipy news of what was happening in the film world, parallel and mainstream. She knew that it would not go beyond the walls of his living room. Almost as if she felt the need to unburden herself to a director who could also be an objective surrogate therapist. Shahani told Smita that she would be his Anna if he ever got to fulfil the dream of making *Anna Karenina*.

AAKHIR KYON *(1985): Should Creativity Demand Suffering?*

You can be flippant and ask J. Om Prakash, *aakhir kyon,* sirji? When the successful purveyor of glossy romance with tuneful music turns to the theme of a woman's right to individuality, you can take it for granted that women's liberation has received official sanction. This successful producer–director crafted a film that sought to capitalize on Smita's image. Smita finds herself at the centre of a failsafe melodrama. She brings her blend of intensity and sincerity to a role that dominates a clichéd narrative with obvious good intentions.

The 'woman's film' when it arrives in commercial cinema, comes

with its own grammar, structure and practised ploys of audience appeasement. There is no way it can shed its commercial baggage, even if casting Smita as the protagonist reduces a star like Rajesh Khanna to a supporting actor. There are certain compulsions of fitting the actor into the 'heroine look'. By this time, Smita had done a fairly large number of mainstream films and knew what was expected. Given these compromises and compulsions, *Aakhir Kyon* is an acceptable film that added to Smita's impressive repertoire. It was certainly one of her more popular films with audiences who were not enamoured by parallel cinema challenges like *Tarang*, for instance.

Aakhir Kyon leaves one with contradictory reactions – gratification that popular cinema has acknowledged a woman's need to get beyond the Sati Savitri syndrome to find her true identity; regret that such an important idea (already validated by the women's movement and parallel cinema) should be hedged with so many safe bets of convention. On balance, gratification wins because commercial cinema treats with sympathy a woman's right to walk out of a demeaning marriage to find not only her true identity, but success as a TV personality and eminent writer. Dr Achala Nagar's story cleverly connects heroine Nisha's success to Smita's early years in TV, injecting a calculated dose of reality to a fictional narrative. Those were days of pre-reality shows on television. The point being, how did Smita make this tailored story so uniquely her own to rank among her Dasavatars?

Smita has not spoken much about her experience of commercial cinema. It is quite illuminating to find out Shabana's views on this. Shabana says: 'I realized quite early that Hindi mainstream cinema exists in an alternative reality. And unless you surrender yourself to that other reality, you stick out like a sore thumb. So you have to go with the flow and, within it, make it work. What I mean is, you've got to flow with the alternative reality and that's the only way it can work.' Shabana arrived at this conclusion, not only decades after working in both kinds of cinema to huge acclaim, but also based on her exposure from childhood to popular cinema. This was courtesy her eminent father, Kaifi Azmi, who wrote some of the most memorable songs for Hindi films as well as dialogues for a film like *Manthan*. Then came Javed Akhtar and his stellar contribution to redefining the role of the scriptwriter in mainstream cinema. Shabana admits to not having seen many of Smita's commercial films, and rounds off with, 'I don't know how good she was in it.' She adds,'Smita's forte was in powerful roles.'

Smita seems to have the instinct to nose out a powerful role where her presence is crucial to add gravitas to a story that veers from kitchen politics to sentimental mush. Many inconvenient questions are just brushed aside. She had played the serious older woman in a

whole range of potboilers in the early 1980s. *Aakhir Kyon* gave her the graph to show Nisha's growth from timid young woman to betrayed wife to accomplished writer who hides her heartache behind a graceful demeanour and stoic smile. Only she knows the price she has had to pay for the poise with which she faces the world. It is Smita's emotional investment in the role and the conviction she brings to her portrayal that makes *Aakhir Kyon* worth discussing. Because Smita has understood the popular idiom and how to be attuned to its pitch. She has learnt to take in her confident stride the neat coincidences and reversals of fate (along with some unpardonable plot stupidities) that are preordained in the script.

As almost all such life sagas tend to do, *Aakhir Kyon* begins with a flashback. J. Om Prakash dutifully dedicates his earnest offering to all maas and behens. The solemn occasion is the release of Ashashri's latest literary offering. It is the fiftieth book of a churner of bestsellers dealing with women's causes. She has preferred to remain incognito hitherto, hiding her literary success under a pen name. Elegantly grey in a cream red-bordered sari, discreet pearls adorning her ears and neck, head modestly covered, Smita presents a picture of perfect taste. Her books and plays have successfully covered the whole gamut of a woman's life and experience. Her new book is her autobiography. The person who inspired her to look back at a turbulent life is her friend, Alok. As he turns the page, Smita's distinct voiceover takes her to her youth…

She is Nisha, an orphan suffered with ill grace by her mama's family. The poor uncle has no say in the way his loud wife and ambitious daughter Indu (Tina Munim) constantly side-line Nisha who has done her MA and dabbles in writing. She is serious and withdrawn but this very reticence attracts the wealthy, handsome Kabir Suri (Rakesh Roshan). He is a guest at the party for a friend's wedding. Nisha, in a simple white salwar suit, sings a semi-classical song and plays the sitar too. The playboy wants a wife who is beautiful but also quiet and biddable. The smooth-tongued Kabir prefers Nisha to her lively and flirtatious cousin Indu. To her aunt's undisguised chagrin and Indu's envy, Nisha marries Kabir. She is happy to be a loving housewife, cooking his favourite dishes. Kabir is a publisher and a public figure. As his wife, Nisha inaugurates a Nari Niketan and makes a surprisingly thoughtful speech. For Kabir, marriage to a gharelu wife gives him a caring housekeeper and the freedom to indulge in affairs.

Nisha's difficult pregnancy, where she is advised complete bed rest and forbidden to climb stairs, gives Indu a chance to plant herself as the solicitous sister. Nisha trustingly hands over not only the house keys but also taking care of her husband's needs. Familiarity between the jiju with a roving eye and a seductive saali predictably leads to a

flagrant affair. Nisha's surgery for the birth of a baby daughter gives the adulterous couple the carte blanche they don't even pretend to need.

Smita portrays the moment of pain through her eloquent eyes and a bleak, defeated nakedness on her face. It quickly blazes into an explosion of righteous rage minus any hint of hysteria. She smashes Indu's pictures and throws out her clothes but Kabir tells her with casual brutality that there is nothing that's hers in the house, including the husband. Smita's disbelieving look speaks volumes. Kabir does his best to break her self-confidence. It is not her MA degree that makes her somebody. Her status is derived from being his wife. Nisha has had enough. 'I can't even breathe in this house. The air here is poisoned.' She is finally forced to walk out of the house, broken by the betrayal, clutching her baby daughter, when Kabir parades Indu as his pretty, understanding partner. The film prolongs her masochistic suffering for the sake of her baby, while Indu preens as the de facto mistress of the house. She is utterly desolate when Kabir stops her from taking the infant daughter. The moment of parting calls for restrained histrionics, Bollywood melodrama style, and Smita acquits herself with grace and dignity, imparting depth to a hackneyed set piece. She comes into her own when she walks out, resolve visible in her straight back and determined eyes.

There is a rather stirring image of Smita standing by the sea, waves washing her feet. Her face, wet from sea spray, is carved with sturdy determination as she swears to herself: she will live as Nisha Sharma, without anyone's support. 'I will live with honour, die with honour,' and she is determined prove that a woman has her own identity. She dedicates her life to the service of Aadhar, a home for destitute women. Her singing and literary abilities help her to stage a charity show where the declamation of woman power, *shakti ka naam hi nari hai*, makes a fan of Alok (Rajesh Khanna), the television cameraman. This leads to her break as an announcer on Doordarshan. The film not only plays up Smita's DD connection but celebrates the camera's love affair with her arresting face, now minus bindi and sindoor. She had earlier said, suhaag isn't just sindoor and mangalsutra, it means the bond of love and trust.

Nisha is now a public figure and this results in an unforeseen encounter with Kabir and Indu at an event. Nisha sings the immensely popular accusation, heavy with irony, on the occasion, '*Dushman na kare dost ne woh kaam kiya hai*'. She leaves Indu and Kabir cringing with guilt, and comes out the moral victor. Incidentally, Deepti Naval remarked how she liked the song and Smita's performance – an unusual compliment when most actors pick out *Bhumika*, *Umbartha* or

Manthan as examples of Smita's stellar talent.

Thus starts Smita's mature avatar, where she is poised, dignified and very much her own person inhabiting her own space. Her small flat is simply decorated, an advertisement for ethnic chic. So unlike the vulgar opulence of her marital mansion. Smita the star has now learnt the art of make-up demanded by popular cinema. Her look spells discreet elegance. She has also learnt to traverse the arbitrary arc of character growth dictated by the grammar of mainstream cinema. So she gives Nisha the confidence to perfect the art of conversation, how to parry Alok's friendly banter without giving away her own still lingering hurt. The film never explains why she gave up her child so easily, not fighting for custody. In the best sentimental style, she positions herself outside the child's school and is satisfied with fleeting encounters.

Nisha is now mature enough to see through Alok's cheerful natter and finally confronts him with justifiable anger; he takes on the sorrows of others and thinks of himself as a god, a saviour? He finally unburdens his own grief and as she wipes his tears, the bond of friendship and empathy deepens. He is witness to her moment of confession:'I am really a weak woman. I tried hard for strength to fight life.' This breakdown comes after Indu accuses her of trying to get back Kabir and his possessions. Nisha is ready to give up on life. Smita injects sincerity into this tired old rhetoric through a superbly controlled performance even as she manages to look photogenic. Ah, she has used her love affair with the camera to look lovely in grief without reducing the level of intensity. Popular cinema does not like a face distorted with emotion.

Alok ceremonially gives her a pen with the admonition, know your hidden strength. This happens after the song she has written and sung,'*Ek andhera laakh sitare*', becomes an anthem of hope and her rebirth as a writer. Nisha's rise to TV and literary fame is ridiculously easy in stereotypical filmi style. While her books revel in emotions, she keeps them at bay in life. She knows Alok is in love with her but is content to accept friendship. Nisha thinks autumn has set forever in her life.

Her new pen name gives her an identity that owes nothing to Kabir's name. Kabir's business is crashing and he needs her bestselling novel to recoup losses. She relishes her moment of payback. She is quietly deadly in her retort: 'The fire in me then poured out in the love of a wife and mother.' She tells a shamefaced Kabir that her child gave her the honour of motherhood but she could not repay it with a mother's love. Hence, her book called *Karz* is her repayment. Her royalty? Never tell Pooja, her daughter, that Ashashri is her mother. Kabir and Indu are suitably punished by the script and groan

under the burden of guilt. Nisha attends Pooja's wedding as writer Ashashri and blesses her.

Now for the long deferred moment. Alok argues: Why can't spring come in a woman's life after autumn as he symbolically puts his mark of tilak on her forehead. This is the culmination of using the supportive male friend as the crutch to a woman's success. Alok is very much a hollow fantasy figure and made even more irritating by Rajesh Khanna's inane exuberance. It is as if this is the only way he can counter Smita's overwhelming presence in a film that offers her a range of experience and emotions to express.

Mainstream cinema creates more problems than it solves when it tries to be progressive. Platonic friendship between a man and a woman is something to be commended when portrayed in popular cinema. He is content to be supportive even when he wants more from the relationship. There is another way to look at this. It makes the lonely woman a sexless being, unaware of the disquieting tensions when a man wants it to be more than platonic. When a huge star takes a backseat to the heroine, he has to be placated by making his role so supportively unselfish that you can see invisible angelic wings. *Aakhir Kyon*poses yet another question about a woman's creativity. Alok asks her what happened to her creative fire when she was happy in her marriage. It became a light to illuminate a blissful home, answers Nisha. Is this to be read as an indictment of marriage stifling a woman's creativity? A question that needs deeper debate than the film, written by a woman, attempts. The sugar-coated lessons bury the issue under a conventional happy ending. There is also a vengeance of sorts, by contrasting Nisha's rise with the fortunes of Kabir and Indu taking a deep downward dive. Very neat poetic justice but, alas, not true to life.

Within all these known constraints, Smita gives a finely polished performance, not sacrificing nuance when faced with the crushing weight of predictable sentimentality. She looks stunning in her carefully chosen saris, and even when the make- up gets too glossy, it does not freeze the mobility of her face, her greatest asset as an actor. The modulation of her voice as it grows heavy with emotion raises the routine rhetoric of mainstream melodrama to a loftier level. It pierces through familiar phrases and makes us palpably feel all that she is going through. Jhelum recollects what Rajesh Khanna had told Smita during *Aakhir Kyon*: 'Why do you get so tortured by living the role? Put some glycerine in the eyes and heave your chest, presto you have the emotional scene.' But artifice and the easy way out were not part of Smita's tools. Even if her wonted intensity seemed out of place, Smita would rather trust her instinct and go with it. That was her way.

*Instead of subtitles, a person translates the dialogue into the desired local language for the audience who hear it live.
*From the collection of writings on Smita and her films, given by her mother Vidyatai Patil.
**Raat Aur Din* (1967) was one such film where Nargis played a woman with multiple personality disorder that is very conveniently resolved.

5

Ensemble Excellence

We all know that parallel cinema minted new iconic actor-stars. What this cinema also did is to make ensemble films in which practically the who's who of this vibrant new world acted together, playing roles small and big, even minor cameos, without egos and hierarchies coming in the way. The goal was to make a film they all believed in, often free or for a pittance, under a director they respected. The working conditions, if on location, were not comfortable, to be euphemistic. This was the Benegal school Smita was groomed in right from the days of *Charandas Chor*. As were many of her confreres like Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Mohan Agashe, Neena Gupta, to name the most prominent. Benegal says everyone did everything in his films – from helping to carry lights, making suggestions, serving food, overseeing the edit – and it was up to the actor to show interest and get involved. Journalists visiting Benegal's sets often found Smita hanging around, doing nothing in particular, at the same time, pitching in for everything. This kind of camaraderie is rare and it reflects in the indefinable spirit of the film we finally see on the screen. Acting in such films was an act of faith.

Of course, ensemble films have lead roles and important supporting roles. What happens in a film like *Mandi* or even both the Ketan Mehta films, *Bhavni Bhavai* and *Mirch Masala*, is the totality of experience. Each role is carefully written, might even be given the freedom of improvisation on the shoot and they all mesh together rather wonderfully. It is difficult then to leave an individual mark in a

work of collective excellence. Good actors do it time and again. It is, in a way, a rather subtle challenge, to blend into the fabric seamlessly and yet stand out, like a bold motif, a high contrast border, the subtle shading of dhoop chhao. The possibilities are many. It is for the actor to imbue the role with her distinct, unmistakable touch. Smita often coloured it with her sheer presence. She could be inspirational as the free-spirited gypsy in *Bhavni Bhavai,* the symbol of rebellion. The role towers over a formidable cast of immensely talented actors, much like the flaming torchbearer of courage and revolt, the iconic Sonbai of *Mirch Masala*, where the film itself is a poster for the best of this invigorating new cinema. Smita could also be the subdued voice of conscience in *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai*, Saeed Mirza's poser to the politically troubled 1980s and the alienation of minorities.

She revelled as the giggly teenager Zeenat of *Mandi*, the pampered and prized possession of Rukmini Bai's decaying kotha in a film dominated by Shabana. It is ironic that in the four films they did together, the major female part was Shabana's prerogative. She was, after all, the senior in this field. It is revealing that Smita did not shy away from the challenge. I have already explored *Nishant* and *Arth* at length. What follows here are short critiques of the four ensemble films in which Smita left her indelible imprint, each in a different way. It is a testament to her versatility, something for which she has not been given due credit. There was a perception that she might have been intimidated by acting with so many actors who were professionally trained – at National School of Drama and FTII but some of her colleagues are quick to disabuse you of this impression. Specifically asked this question, Shabana emphatically said: 'I don't think so. I don't think I sensed any kind of insecurity in her.' Om Puri characterizes her thus: 'Instinctive actress, had never trained formally. She learnt on the job.' That was good enough for her to blend seamlessly with this awesome cast of actors and also be remembered for her unique intensity that enriched the experience as a whole.

BHAVNI BHAVAI *(Gujarati),* ANDHER NAGARI *(Hindi), 1980: The Spirit of Liberation*

Bhavni Bhavai marked the high point of the New Cinema movement, and Ketan Mehta minted an instant reputation (that he could not sustain) as an exciting name with his constant need to experiment. In *Bhavni Bhavai*, with its Brechtian blend of direct address and critical asides, dance, music and farce, Mehta created a wonderfully exuberant yet polemical film that linked an old folk tale to contemporary reality. It reinvented the epic for our contentious times where the oppression of Dalits is often addressed in dreary clichés. Mehta's film reprises an old Bhavai tale, *Achootno Vesh.*

The narrative starts with the present, depicting the desperate plight of untouchables, whose huts have been burnt down. They are homeless, with no hope of a settled life. A minstrel decides to revive their spirit with his rendition of a folk song. His song takes the story into the past. Events narrated in the song are now enacted in Bhavai form. The traditional Bhavai that laces narration with free improvisations, lively dance and catchy music is creatively renewed both as a narrative form and larger metaphor. The narrators-cum-commentators, Rangla and Rangli, tell the story of a long-ago kingdom ruled by a tyrannical king (a brilliant Naseeruddin Shah who plays the tyrant as a buffoon). When a son is born to his elder queen, the jealous younger queen (a petulant seductress charmingly played by Suhasini Mulay) plots with her lover, the commander-in-chief (Benjamin Gilani), to have the baby drowned. The courtiers who are to carry out the evil deed feel a twinge of conscience and set the baby afloat in a box (like Karna whose tragic fate is constantly invoked by our cinema). An old untouchable couple, Malo (Om Puri) and his wife (Dina Pathak), find the baby and raise him as their son Jivo (Mohan Gokhale). He grows into a handsome youth in love with the wandering gypsy Ujaan (Smita Patil) who constantly challenges him to discard the traditional demeaning garb the untouchable is made to wear. An untouchable is forced to tie a broom to the waist to sweep away the 'pollution' of his footsteps, attach a third sleeve to signify submission and hang a clay spittoon round the neck. These outward symbols might have gone but has the condition of Dalits changed today? That is the implicit question the film asks and Ujaan articulates with passion in the folk version and as a silent presence in today's reality.

Mehta uses deliberate anachronisms to jolt us out of the comfort of listening to an old yarn. The All India Radio signature tune plays when we spy the Raja behind a curtain after a pitcher of water is ceremonially poured on him. The James Bond theme sounds like a call to exciting action when there is talk of war. Unfortunately, the richly decorated palace is stinking because the untouchables, who are away at a wedding, have not cleaned the royal latrines.

When the song returns to the present, the lyrics are dark and doomed. The minstrel narrates 'the Tales of Time, tears pour out of my heart'. We see the first close-up of Smita, and we return to her as she asks the apathetic hero in anger: 'Don't you feel anything? Are you all cocooned in darkness?' She is a quieter presence now, but her nagging questions linger in the background. 'This is a blind man's world, each in his own darkness.' The words of the song sum up the overwhelming sense of hopelessness that grips them, an effective contrast to the high-spirited narrative of the past.

When the film goes into the past, you see her as a lively young woman practically running into the frame, herding her donkeys expertly across the hilly terrain. We next see her by the stream, her slim bare back exposed while bathing. The lecherous priest spies on her and Jivo alerts Ujaan. She swiftly covers herself, turns like a spitfire on the cringing priest, spewing fiery words of choice abuse:'Dirty Brahmin, degenerate, let the crows peck your eyes.' Splashing her feet in water, humming to herself, she breaks into laughter with infectious gaiety. Ujaan asks Jivo why he and his folk wear that ridiculous broom tail.'You remind me of a donkey,' she tells the young man who doesn't know how to react to her. Ujaan then lovingly splashes her donkey with water, praises its long ears, fair skin and says, 'My donkey is the most handsome of men.' Her pointed barbs at the donkey's cowardice are aimed at Jivo, though of course she denies it. She does not play coy. She likes Jivo and knows he is attracted to her. She tells him, 'I know you are brave enough to go to the village and take me with you,' challenge sparkling in her eyes. She is full of laughter, defiance and dares others to follow her. She will not have anything to do with Jivo unless he discards his humiliating garb. He must show his defiance publicly in town. Ujaan as a gypsy holds herself above these caste restrictions. She is the living spirit of liberation.

The wily queen discovers that Jivo is alive and she plots to get him publicly killed. The drought has dried up the palace step- well and the entire populace is suffering. The queen convinces the totally biddable king to sacrifice a young man bearing on his body the thirty-two auspicious signs so that the wells fill up again. It is Jivo who meets all the requirements. The Raja demands Malo (Om Puri) to give up his absconding son for the greater good of the people. Ujaan is angry and upbraids them.'I won't tell you where Jivo is even if I know it,' she declares defiantly. She lashes them with her tongue: 'Cringing cowards with tails between your legs, who amongst you is alive? What have the dead to fear death?' Her passionate words, alternately pleading and rousing, now become rational arguments. 'What are these thirty-two signs? How can you believe it? I see no difference between Jivo and us.'

When reasoning fails, she springs like a warrior before the Raja's soldiers. Ujaan pronounces her ultimatum – he will stab himself with a dagger if you seize his father – in a firm and clear voice, Smita's biggest asset in dramatic scenes. Her voice grows heavy with the inevitability of tragedy. Yet, she sees it as an opportunity for selfless heroism: 'Everyone has to die. If you die helping others, your living becomes worthwhile.'

The play within the film begins. She prepares him for death. 'It's

harder to kill a myth than a man.' These words come from the merchant, the real power in the state. He only lets the blustering Raja appear to take decisions. The merchant cautions, if we forcibly kill Jivo, he will become a martyr, then a myth and a legend. Words that echo through troubled human history down the ages.

The film returns to the bleak present. The warning is clear. 'With your stories, don't opiate the children … your river is too slow and tranquilizing.' Let fury unleash, is the clarion call. So instead of tranquilizing, addictive fiction, the director gives an alternate ending. Before Jivo is ritually beheaded, Malo jumps into the step-well. It unleashes a pralay, the deluge that drowns everything. Mehta intercuts this with scenes of the present; crowds rising up in fury, from burnt-out huts in a village to factory chimneys spewing smoke to a foreboding, atonal soundtrack.

As befits a narrative that avowedly owes so much to Brecht, Mehta offers two endings. One a fairy tale last-minute reprieve, the second a tragedy of epic proportions. The narrator poses the central question: did the king really behead the handsome prince? Especially when he is in love with a gypsy, an inspirational figure who asks the downtrodden to revolt. There is always an alternative ending, be it in the past or pointing to the present exploitation of Dalits who may not have to wear brooms any more but are still subject to social stigma, filling them with anger and despair in equal measure. The same set of principal characters is yoked to the continuum of suffering. Will they, can they, change their destiny? And the person posing these challenging questions is Smita. Smita Patil, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah seem to revel in redefining what ensemble acting is about. Mehta capitalizes on the visual contrast – the stark landscape against the architectural richness of the locale – to add another dimension to this landmark of Indian cinema. Smita blazes across the screen as the untameable spirit of freedom, a wilful gypsy who demands that people examine their acquiescence in their own exploitation. She incites them to revolt. Smita looks stunning and energetic in a high-voltage role that extracts the best from her extraordinary repertoire of skills.

Bhavni Bhavai won instant critical acclaim when shown in festivals. Elliot Stein wrote in *Film Comment*, July 1981: 'The costumes are stunning; songs and dances are both entertaining and"in situation". Mehta seemed the most perceptive and talented of the gaggle of young directors whose work was on show in Delhi.' To quote a more detailed critique by Gene Moskowitz in the mainstream trade publication *Variety* (USA), January 1981: 'A delightful didactic fable with sharp Brechtian influences that works on practically all levels. This colourful film is inventive in its costuming, playing, setting and imbuing a comedy parable with digestible statements on authoritarianism and

revolt.'

Bhavni Bhavai was made on a tiny budget. Ketan Mehta talks rather nostalgically of his first film made against great odds. 'We were all very young then, beginning our careers. It was shot in a haveli near Nadiad. It was an old haveli and we all stayed there. It was quite a commune. That kind of a spirit is not possible anymore. All of them worked free. This is again something you can't dream of. We were all friends from the Institute days. Smita had come there to shoot for a diploma film. We became friends. We were beginning our careers at the same time, dreaming the same dreams. She was a natural. Born to it, but she tuned in to the spirit of the character. I really did not have to work hard with her. She caught on and had a very sharp actor's instinct. Before you said a thing, she would understand. There is an earthy quality in her, maybe because of her parents, her background of social consciousness.'

Om Puri speaks of both the travails and good times during the shooting of *Bhavni Bhavai* on location. Ketan's grandmother cooked for them and even though she had help, she managed the kitchen. 'We all had our rough gaddas and chadars all over the floor in the haveli. There was me, Smita, Mohan Gokhale, Naseer and Suhasini Mulay. Five of us, there was one verandah and one room inside. There were five gaddas. It was not like today; I sleep on this gadda and every day, I will be sleeping on it. Whoever came and wanted to sleep would go inside and sleep in the room on any available gadda. The verandah was a kind of extension of the room. There was only one toilet downstairs. We would be mugging up our dialogue all the time, memorizing it loudly. Everybody had little slips of dialogue in hand. So even if were sitting on the potty we would be speaking out our lines. So the ones outside would yell, *arre bahar nikalna, idhar aakeseekhna. Hum ko bhi khatam karna hai*. Smita *oopar se chillayegi,arre dekhna, khali hai kya ya andar se awaaze aa rahi hai?* It was hilarious.' It *is* hilarious the way Om tells it.

There was no specific dialogue coach. Om Puri regales with incidents from the location.

'Dina Pathak was everybody's coach. One particular dialogue, I am so ashamed, I gave eight takes. Even then, I couldn't do it. The light had gone. We had to do it the next day. Till today, even bloody twenty-five years later, I still remember it.' His greeting to Dina-ji was a whole ream of Gujarati dialogue from the film at express speed without pause or punctuation all in one go! He repeats it for my benefit at the same express speed. 'Poor Dina- ji used to close her ears. We of course wrote it in Hindi with a Gujarati accent.' The film's highlight is its lilting speech, from broad rustic humour, stylized rhetoric to poetic rhythms. So all that memorizing, even on the potty,

was mandatory, even if they dubbed it later on. Lip sync was crucial. The film was dubbed into Hindi later.

A final story from the making of *Bhavni Bhavai* that speaks eloquently of the spirit in which the film came to life. Om Puri assumed that it is well-known. I hear it the first time from him. 'There was one moment during *Bhavni Bhavai*. It was such a beautiful moment. Smita was not a regular smoker. All of us had a few drags of hash. We were sitting in a small room, it was almost like a storeroom. And relaxing, because the shot was getting ready. Someone picked up a thali and spoon, another guy was playing a mouth organ kind of a thing, we made up music, another picked up a lota, all of us were playing and it came to a crescendo. It was beautiful. I don't know who has the recording but it was recorded. Smita was very much part of it.' Making spontaneous music together. Can anything be more creatively uplifting?

ALBERT PINTO KO GUSSA KYON AATA HAI? *(1980): The Quiet Voice of Conscience*

Saeed Mirza is Indian cinema's original angry young man – he projects the thinking man's anger about so much that's wrong in our society. The penchant for long-winded, self-explanatory titles became his signature but that does not in any way lessen either the importance of the questions Mirza asks or the impact of the films. Mirza learned to focus his anger and created the alternate angry young man of parallel cinema in Albert Pinto and made Naseeruddin Shah synonymous with a different kind of non-heroic anger. Anger of the common man, minus the mythologizing mystique.

Mirza probes the origins of urban angst in his protest quartet – *Arvind Desai Ki Ajab Dastan* (1978), *Albert Pinto*, *Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho* (1984), *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989) – taking up a specific theme set in a specific ethnic group. Cinéma vérité rears its head disconcertingly amidst the naturalistic ethos of *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai*, set in Bandra's Roman Catholic community. The Brechtian direct address is an occasional narrative punctuation to jolt us out of complacency. He has fun with a spiked version of a mainstream-style song, '*Paanch lakh ki gadi hai*'. The three-plus-minute song is a single shot as the camera circles, pans and pauses in a garage where the mechanics sing their subversive paean to luxury in the midst of penury. Marxist polemics delivered with wit, imagination and sympathy for the dreams of the working class to which the hero Albert Pinto belongs but doesn't want to be trapped in.

There is the yawning generation gap, between a mill worker father and the mechanic son who wants to drive the expensive cars he repairs, and thinks of his indulgent clients as friends. Albert typifies

the kind of self-denying political naivety that exasperates his family. His father (Arvind Deshpande, the doyen of Marathi theatre) despairs of ever being able to educate his sons politically and make him see on which side of the class war he ought to be. Albert is the flashy dresser, self-assured of his charm and superiority to fellow workers. He belongs to the lot that looks westward for every solution. The other son, Dominic (Dilip Dhawan), gets into bad company and is a petty thief, part of a gang. The pious mother (Sulabha Deshpande) spends most of her time in church, as an escape of sorts from family problems.

Other than Mr Pinto senior, the only sane voice that articulates both the larger social issues and family conflicts is Joan (Smita Patil), Albert's sister. Joan has a limp and works as a salesgirl in a sari shop. Joan alone understands why her father joins the strike at the mill, unlike Albert who thinks (tutored by his rich clients) that only lazy layabouts go on strike. A cocky Albert agrees with his worried mom about the total uselessness of strikes. Joan quietly says, 'Albert, *tum gadha ho aur gadha hi rahega*.' Albert reacts angrily, 'What did you say?'. '*Gadha*,' Joan responds with quiet emphasis. It is a key scene that underlines the gulf between brother and sister. She is the moral centre of the narrative, alongside her father. There is a quiet bond between the two that goes beyond filial affection. It is a relationship between two adults who may belong to different generations but share similar ideas and ethical principles.

The other woman in Albert's life is his fiancée Stella (Shabana Azmi). She is a typical Sandra from Bandra – an ambitious Christian working girl who wears Western outfits. This is a bone of contention with Albert who thinks it makes her prey to men who think Christian girls are easy. Her brother is planning to migrate to Canada like many in his community who see no future in India. Both Joan and Stella face different kinds of sexual harassment at work. Stella's boss propositions her quite openly and she wants to talk it over with Albert who seems to have no time for real conversation with anybody. Joan has to deal with a leering customer who wants her to wear a sari that he plans to buy for his 'sister'. Joan handles it with a nice mix of sarcasm and anger.'So I am like your sister? Does she also limp?' She speaks in a friendly tone without anger. But the barbs hit home.'Very pretty, is she? Is she also lame?' She walks back and forth, almost proud of her limp, pausing to ask her sharp, shaming questions. Joan is plainly dressed, in a cotton sari and sleeveless blouse, hair in a neat bun. Dignity is part of her persona, something she doesn't have to advertise loudly. She ignores the ne'er do well Dominic, not answering his sneering question, 'Are you ashamed to call me brother?' Her silence is enigmatic. Indication of what she feels for both her brothers

emerges in the end, in actions, not mere words.

Saeed Mirza brings out the warmth between father and daughter in a lovely scene that says so much with a casual touch. On Sunday, she reads out the headlines to her father and imparts a sarcastic edge to all the political news. You feel she is almost speaking for the writer/director. You also see her bringing her father's shaving kit, telling him almost sternly, 'You must shave because you shouldn't look defeated when you are on strike.' A tender moment of quiet amusement between a father and his caring daughter. Smita and Arvind Deshpande play the scene at the right pitch and tone.

Joan is the quiet, practical one in a family that is often overwrought by emotion. When Albert and Stella are once again in the middle of their usual squabble, Joan enters silently, sits down and tells them the really important news: Dominic is in jail having been caught during burglary. She has this ability to shut out extraneous distractions, stock irritations and get straight to the heart of the matter, unlike her stupid brother who thinks he knows best, not only for himself but everyone else. He is politically illiterate and his emotional intelligence is not great either.

The narrative is building up to its logical denouement. The father comes home in a torn shirt after he has been roughed up by management stooges hired to break the strike. Joan silently hands him a fresh shirt. Her quiet resolve comes through at critical times. The priest expresses helplessness when he is approached for advice on how to deal with the selective violence let loose by mill owners. 'What can anyone do?' Joan's answer is terse and firm: 'We can fight.'

It is only when his father is targeted by violent goons that Albert begins to see the truth – political, social and economic. Albert's macho swagger can't blind him to what is happening around. His father and Joan are keys to his understanding, and Albert's anger finds a focus. His education begins.

Smita exudes the calm courage and clear thinking to represent the opposite of Albert who dominates the narrative with his brash machismo. Like so many others, Saeed Mirza was also struck by her'presence'.'I must clarify that it is cinematic presence I mean,' adds Mirza. 'I sensed an incredible inner strength in this young woman. And a quietness. She is the kind of person who doesn't speak out much but internalizes a lot of things. And that's the kind of character I had in mind for the sister who sees the political situation, who is the opposite of her brother – macho, brash and incredibly stupid. As a counter-balance to his effervescence, Smita was the kind of balance the film required.' Speaking about the scene where Joan calls him 'gadha', Mirza says,'I didn't need to elaborate why she called him gadha. There was a strength to her counter opinion to what Albert

stood for.'

Mirza reflects further.'More than casting her as this counter balance, what I noticed about her as a human being was that she was of serious intent. Not just in films but her vision of the world. Perhaps because of her father being in politics, but she was beyond politics and that was critically important. It's as if she had seen it all upfront and close, and deliberately kept a distance from it.' He attributes her cultured rootedness to her engagement with the arts, theatre, writers, painters.

Mirza shares something not known till now. 'When we had finished shooting and were dubbing, Smita sent me a note. It was a kind of mirror to myself. Her note was (I have lost it) … to the effect that … you speak with a certain political ideology, how long will you adhere to it? It was as if she saw something in me that made her ask this. It was like asking, is he genuinely sincere in his vision of the world or is it momentary? It was a cautionary note. I remember I showed it to my wife Jennifer and she said, "Think about it." It was upfront. Where did it come from? This note was beyond the film. It struck me that I never imagined things beyond the film, but she was noticing other things.'

Mirza also speculates, 'In a strange way, she was also in a sense unhappy with the choice she made of working in popular cinema. I have a strange suspicion; I can't back it with data or evidence. This is a mere projection from the note she sent me. I don't know whether I am right, whether it applied to herself. This is a dilemma that all parallel cinema actors faced. Smita was progressive, quietly and firmly with her heart in the right place. Therefore, a cautionary note to a man like Saeed Mirza!' Mirza says this in a self-deprecatory tone, amused and also struck by it.'I respect her for that. I haven't ever spoken about it and welcome this opportunity to talk about it.'

MANDI *(1983): All the World's a Market Place*

Shyam Benegal's black comedy *Mandi* is built round the adage that *all the world's a market place; each of us has a price*. It is a spirited romp, a sex farce that examines female sexuality and its commoditization by patriarchy, a rambunctious social satire on how religion and the sex trade are mutually dependent. It is a lesson in the economics of running a brothel when the clientele is changing from the old-world feudal patronage peopled by connoisseurs of poetry, music and dance to market-savvy, nouveau riche merchants. Benegal sets the film in his native milieu of a Telangana small town where the feudal fiefdom of landed gentry is being usurped by the vigorous thrust of the mercantile class. The barter of female flesh works as an expansive metaphor for the whorehouse of a corrupting world, starting with small fry like the custodian of law (the buffoon of a hafta- hungry

havildar, drooling over the brothel inmates); the predatory representative of a parasitic ancillary industry, an enterprising photographer (Om Puri) sneaking to snap titillating pictures of the girls, promising Bombay film-stardom to the most fetching dancer he fancies.

The small-town ambience and power politics are essential to appreciate the nuances of satire. The big fish have their own way of looking at the kotha. The municipal chairman Agarwal (Saeed Jaffrey) is from the decadent old world, with nawabi ways and weaknesses. He is a loyal friend and well-wisher of Rukmini Bai, the matronly brothel madam played with masterly aplomb by Shabana Azmi. She guards his secret that comes out later in the film. She has brought up his illegitimate daughter born to another tawaif, groomed her into the kotha's prized possession, Zeenat (Smita Patil), the accomplished singer. Gupta (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) is the real estate magnate, owner of the crumbling mansion (it has seen better days) occupied by Rukmini Bai and Co. Rukmini Bai may be matronly now but that has in no way dimmed her practised charms. She tries her 'adaas' on the resistant Gupta, trying to hold on to her kotha with a mixture of pathos (where will my poor girls go?) and subtle barbs at the philistine ways of the newly rich.

Gupta is a shrewd operator who quickly realizes that Rukmini Bai could be the profitable nucleus of a burgeoning township in the rocky uncultivated land nearby. All it has is the ruined remains of a Muslim saint's tomb. This proposed business alliance is the basic argument of the film. Whether it is the construction workers taking liberties with what they consider fair game or the middle-class occupants of the new housing colonies, the kotha girls cater to a need that comes after food and shelter.

Mandi delves into the all-female ethos of the kotha, bringing out the innate intimacy and comfort women find in each other, despite their petty rivalries and usual squabbles. Rukmini Bai clings to the genteel aura of cultured accomplishments, calling herself and her 'bachchis' artistes, even though a lot of naked flesh trade goes on under the tawdry glitter of song-and-dance- filled mehfils. The girls resent the special privileges accorded to the still virginal Zeenat (implying that the deal is waiting for a big bidder). Zeenat is ensconced in the upstairs suite, the musicians are to practise with her first and then the others get their turn. Zeenat is being assiduously tutored to shine in the courtly ways of the mehfil, to sing erotic ghazals with feeling and imbue her kathak performance with seductive coyness. Though she is being prepared for the highest bidder, the ugly possibility of incest rears its threatening head, like a coiled cobra rearing up to strike at the most opportune (or

inopportune, for the comic edge) moment. It has been lying quiescent among the crumbling stones of a decaying house, guarding an old secret.

Our first sight of Zeenat performing is anything but virginal. The film opens to the suggestive words and seductive lilt of '*Chubhti hai bhari angiya*' in Asha Bhosle's provocative voice. Zeenat, in a florid pink sari with silver embroidery, performs her beguiling tricks in the classic sit-down pose, casting out her alluring adaas – holding up her pallu, heaving her breasts, inviting smiles and beckoning glances – to susceptible men in the mehfil. Rukmini Bai, her pandaan ensconced beside her, beams with possessive pride, adding her own bit to the suggestive atmosphere, adjusting the neckline of her blouse – the Pavlovian response of a woman on display, even if she herself is not performing. Zeenat then gets up and dances – rather languorously, the vigorous kathak is left for Neena Gupta's Vasanti – playing with her long, jasmine-entwined braid. We next see her minus war paint, lost in practice. There is a difference between her put-on performer persona and what she is in private; sometimes serious, at other times trying out her coquettish charms on the men besotted with her – the fawning cop, the ingratiating photographer (a specimen of small-time paparazzo) and the totally smitten Sushil.

The municipal chairman's legitimate son Sushil (Aditya Bhattacharya), a blank-eyed young man, is betrothed to Gupta's nubile, painfully shy daughter in a power alliance negotiated by the parents. Zeenat performs her signature ghazal, '*Zamaane badalte hain har aan khubaan … Yeh sab kuch hai bigdi zamaane ki baatein*'. Sushil is dumbstruck. An enthralled zombie, he haunts the kotha, shooed away like a pesky fly whenever the eternally busy Rukmini Bai catches him. Zeenat revels in all this male attention that gives her a heady sense of her own power. Smita brings a vapid giggliness to offset the sentimental bird-in-a- gilded-cage image she affects in a playacting mood of self-pity. She preens over the other girls and makes no attempt to make friends, a contrast to the bond the others share despite the daily bickering over things minor and major. Initially, Zeenat is all childish contentment, obeying the surrogate mother's pampering without a question, almost as if she is entitled to it. Zeenat knows how to manipulate the older woman. She touches her face tenderly when Bai goes all sentimental about how men betray and women get the bad name. She offers to massage Bai's head and has her melting, with head tucked on Zeenat's shoulder. She asks her protégé to sing her favourite '*Zamaane badalte hai*' and the young woman happily obliges.

Mandi's layered narrative has a strand that intrigues us with its ambiguity. There is a sequence right out of a French bedroom farce.

Zeenat, after her performance of her pièce de résistance '*Chubhti hai bhari angiya*', is at home. Taking off her jewellery, she looks into the mirror and practises heaving her breasts with naughty amusement at her own sexiness. Smita exudes a bit of narcissistic gratification implicit in her put-on innocent act.

Now Ram Prasad (Om Puri), the photographer, seizes his chance to take her photo. Zeenat is all eagerness, even ready for a bit of daring exposure. He settles for her in a blouse and petticoat, posing on the bed. She plays the coquette for the camera, trying all angles and poses. The portly havildar heaves himself up next and tries to bed her at which time Ram Prasad emerges from under the bed. Then follows Sushil, in his waking sleepwalking mode. When Rukmini Bai trudges up to this boudoir of farcical action, Zeenat plays the naive ingénue, laughing innocently at the young man who is the real innocent here. She makes desperate signs to him behind Bai's back, while he is led away by the other men.

On another occasion, when Sushil manages to sneak in unnoticed, the two eager virgins are all set to embark on their first experience. Zeenat takes the lead, verbally. Once again, Bai plays spoilsport and snuggles up to Zeenat, stroking the girl's foot while Sushil reaches out for the same foot from his hiding place under the bed. Zeenat giggles mid-song, while she is entertaining Bai's farmaish for her favourite ghazal. She shifts his hand away and gurgles as she gets all tickled – physically and at the absurdity of the risqué situation. Bai sleeps with her head on Zeenat's breast, wrapped in a mutual embrace. You have both eroticism and comic farce at play here. There is a daring hint that Zeenat enjoys both the touches, just opening the door to let a whiff of lesbianism in. At the same time, the scene calls for perfect comic timing and leaves the question of lesbian eroticism hanging in the air.

About this lesbian element in what is seemingly a maternal attachment, both Benegal and Shabana say it has been left tantalizingly vague. It is for the reader to infer. 'I don't think Shyam Benegal told us in so many words. When he framed the shots, there is a suggestion that there may be more than just the maternal there but it is yours to read it,' says Shabana. Her final word on the subject: 'But I think her being so possessive about Zeenat says something. That comes from a little more than just the maternal instinct.' She adds generously, 'Remember there was that bedroom scene that was like a French farce? Smita was wonderful. She was lovely. She had that spirit of fun and naughtiness (the young man hiding under the bed) which I thought Shyam was able to capture very well.'

Zeenat is not all coy compliance as time goes by. She progresses to flutters of protest and then withdraws into sulks when she is forbidden

– almost hysterically – to entertain the attentions of her young, awkward suitor. Smita adds a dash of calculated cunning to her adolescent naivety. She gives the impression of biding her time, to make the best of her opportunity. Suddenly, she can turn into a gleeful child, imitating and provoking a monkey that has run amok and entered her room. It is ironic that Rukmini Bai tries to shield Zeenat from the raunchy atmosphere rampant among the girls when the pretence of a courtesan's salon is dropped. The matron in her insists on maintaining the veneer of old-world courtliness even when one of her suppliers brings in a deaf–mute girl to be broken into prostitution. Zeenat is not the ingénue of classic comedy. Sheltered she may be but her native intelligence tells her what actually goes on around her. She is like a butterfly unfurling her wings, testing her power over men and enjoying the game of playing off one against the other. In one word, a tease who likes dangling her suitors on a string and playing them for puppets to entertain herself. Very typical teenager behaviour. At one point, she giggles in amusement when alone with the mesmerized Sushil, and taunts him: you want it right here and now! A tease all right.

Throughout, one senses that here is a girl who is waiting for something to happen. When the time is propitious, she will do the unexpected. Smita balances a capricious streak against genuine warmth for the woman who has cared for her like a mother. When Rukmini Bai needs her, for example, when the moral police brigade holds a dharna to close down an immoral bordello in the middle of town, she can put on the injured artiste act for all it is worth. Zeenat parrots, with high emotion: 'We'll give up our life if need be but not our art', and earns a quiet 'shabash' from Bai.

Rukmini Bai's troubles are not just about the possibility of displacement. Shantidevi, a zealous crusader for moral rectitude, wants to be a saviour of the 'unfortunate' girls and take them away to a rescue home. The kotha inmates are rambunctiously rowdy, riotously bawdy and profanely down to earth as they get the better of the social worker who campaigns against their polluting presence. Benegal plays this whole encounter for laughs, highlighting the hypocrisy of an upper-class woman who uses social work for personal and political gain.

Everyone around her either likes Zeenat or envies her special status. The enthralled men are a different breed, exhibiting various degrees of lust, longing and lovesickness. But one man is curiously indifferent. And that is Tungrus (Naseeruddin Shah), a chorus-like figure who is utterly devoted to Rukmini Bai even as he rants and rails incoherently when drunk. His soliloquies are dire imprecations of the fate awaiting Rukmini Bai for her immorality punctuated with

snatches of the same line of a poem repeated ad nauseum. The character of a generally abused dogsbody, curiously emasculated in the sex-charged ambience, shows an evolutionary form of the harem eunuch. When everyone deserts Rukmini Bai in the new location as her hard- headed deputy takes over the business, it is Tungrus who accompanies her when she sets forth, clutching her box of jewels and faith in starting the business again in some other place.

Zeenat is unable to come to terms with the new location on the town's outskirts. Everything, including the house being rebuilt, has a sense of incompletion. She confronts Bai about why she is not allowed to meet Sushil and the truth comes out.

Zeeant is morose, withdrawn and spitefully tells Bai she means nothing to her. At times, she even bestirs herself sufficiently to intervene on Vasanti's behalf, when the hard- headed Nadira (Soni Razdan) is trying to force her into entertaining Gupta's men – 'If she doesn't want to, she won't.' It is almost as if she is making another decision for herself. The keeper of the saint's grave, the Fakir who makes mysterious pronouncements, bids the caged bird to fly away. She asks him, to be doubly sure, who exactly he asks to fly away. Anyone who can hear is his cryptic answer. In a series of terse questions and answers, Zeenat wonders: can a bird live outside the cage? 'He'll die in the cage too. At least the bird will find an identity outside the cage,' is the Fakir's clinching argument. It is almost as if Zeenat has been waiting for someone outside the kotha to validate her decision. Sushil takes all the money he can lay hands on, comes on his bike and the awkward gallant rides away with his very pragmatic love. Bai and Agarwal give them futile chase. The bike stalls and when Sushil is repairing it, Zeenat kisses him chastely on the forehead and walks away with the bag of money. It is the survival of not only the fittest but also the most wily.

In a film based on Ghulam Abbas's short story 'Aanandi'– with *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* hovering over it as additional inspiration – Rukmini Bai is the dominating persona and Shabana's tour-de-force performance makes it a memorable landmark in terms of perfection of body language: she gained weight for it, adopted a matronly waddle, is warm and bossy, generous and sarcastic as the situation demands. Smita's Zeenat is not pitted against her in a dramatic way but she is in a confrontational relationship at the end. Is she an ingrate? However pampered, still a caged bird seizing the moment to make her own destiny? Zeenat is finally an opportunist, a lesson she learnt from the best in the trade, Rukmini Bai herself.

Playing Zeenat is a risk Smita took, and she held her own. In addition, this is almost the only time she played a teenager (it was one of her phases in *Bhumika*, and the potboiler *Chatpatee*is the other

instance). Otherwise, Smita had to wear the halo of maturity and seriousness in most of her films. In *Mandi*, she was younger than her age and Shabana much older than hers.

Incidentally, Smita sang the opening lines of'*Zamaane badalte hai*' that recur again as did Shabana the folk ditty '*Ujala kapda peheno nakko*'. Benegal says Smita had a good singing voice, as does Shabana. '*Zamaane badalte hai*' was written by the eighteenth-century poet Insha whose songs were popular in kothas. Rukmini Bai's ditty is by a very well-known twentieth- century Deccani poet, Sarwar Danda Takhallus. Benegal's research found the right songs for his kotha's last days.

Shabana acknowledges that she got to know Smita mostly on the sets of *Mandi*. 'During *Nishant*, I don't have such clear memories of her. It was during *Mandi* … obviously because we had so many scenes together. The interesting thing was that both Smita and I had been given a car each to travel to the location which was about two hours away. We must have used the cars for barely one day. Then we decided that it was much more fun to join the people in the bus. The whole gang was there, they used to sing, play antakshari and do a ton of silly things. We gave up our individual cars to travel with everybody else to go to the location. Then I came to find out things about her. She was quite the tomboy. She used to play volleyball with the boys which was something I could not do.'

Aditya Bhattacharya, film-maker, photographer and occasional actor, was cast as the lovelorn Sushil. 'I was a love- struck eighteen-year-old,' confesses Aditya without having to explain. The dazed expression he wore throughout was tailor- made and Benegal pulled off yet another casting sleight of hand.

The unit celebrated the birthdays of both Shabana and Smita on location. Shabana's birthday falls on 18 September and her parents came down from Bombay. As Smita's birthday neared, Benegal could sense her restlessness. So he arranged for her parents to come down too, to celebrate Smita's birthday on 17 October. Om Puri has a lovely little story to add. Vidyatai came to know that Om's birthday was on 18 October and she decided she would celebrate both their birthdays, the previous night. She put tilak first on Smita's forehead and then Om's, and blessed them both.

Another observant visitor on location was Bhawana Somaaya, a veteran film journalist, editor and author. At that juncture of her career, she had become known in the fraternity as Shabana's friend. Bhawana was there to report on the shoot and she was sharing Shabana's room. She went along in the bus every morning and interacted with all, from Satish Kaushik to Shabana. The divide between the two female stars was like the Shak Rukh and Aamir Khan camps of today – this is Bhawana's analogy. The principals were civil

and cordial with each other but the others seem to be afraid to speak up. Bhawana was returning to Bombay and Shabana, seeing off her friend, told her that she would be riding to the airport with Smita who too was flying back to Bombay. As they got talking on the flight, Smita was curious about Bhawana's shopping in Hyderabad. 'Just saris and mangalsutras,' replied Bhawana. She showed her the mangalsutras (Hyderabadi specials, small black beads with a few pearls strung in the centre, popular with Hindus and Muslims alike) she had bought. Smita asked her how much she had paid. Bhawana recalls the conversation: 'I said five rupees. And she said,"Is that how cheap a mangalsutra is today?" It was a loaded statement.'

Smita had taken two days off from *Mandi* to attend Amitabh Bachchan's big birthday do. She had done *Shakti* and *Namak Halaal* with the superstar. It was the time Smita rode two boats at the same time. She managed to keep the balance with a fair degree of poise and success.

MIRCH MASALA *(1986): Flaming Rebel*

Mirch Masala was the centrepiece of IFFI 1987 in Delhi. The collective emotion at Siri Fort when this splendid metaphorical pageantry was screened as a tribute to Smita was indescribable; the loss was shockingly recent and too raw. There was also a subterranean recognition that *Mirch Masala* was an unforeseen but fitting culmination of a blazing career. This kind of coincidence happens very rarely. The occasion was tragic, the mood was sombre. And yet, there was this desperate need to celebrate Smita's vibrancy, intensity and vitality. If a brief life crowded with unmatched achievement needed a final testament to her genius, *Mirch Masala*'s Sonbai personified it. It was her last film (a few others were released later) and what a magnificent expression of cinematic art it is! Not only was it the concentration of everything that was best in parallel cinema but it also recast the narrative into a new idiom. Melodrama was magnified to operatic proportions while the subtext teemed with ever richer meanings. All this narrative magnificence was embodied in Smita's Sonbai – passionate, defiant, a living epic figure.

Mirch Masala has the once-upon-a-time timbre of a fable. It is realistic in its details and time frame – but with conscious overtones of melodrama – that peaks to epic grandeur, where an everyday woman transforms into a living symbol of rebellion against a patriarchal, feudal order. In that once-upon-a-time lived a woman, fiery as a *lal mirch*, fragrant as a wild flower, unsullied as a lotus. She is Sonbai, who might be poor but her proud bearing tells us she is someone special. You can see this in her assured stride despite the voluminous clothes and her scorn for the idle men whiling away time at the

village square. Her husband (Raj Babbar) is jobless. The village idlers delight in innuendo – the husband's lassitude is caused by Sonbai's sexual hunger that has worn him out in the night. Ketan Mehta recasts Smita's earthy sensuousness, which had become something of a stereotype in weaker imaginations, into an icon of proud defiance. It is a mature woman's power that comes from knowing her own sensuousness under that daunting, steely determination. She is also a loving wife who tries her best to make her mercurial husband – petulant one minute and childishly exuberant the next – stay back in the village. She chides and pleads but finally, has to let him go once he gets a job in the railways.

The time is the cusp of Independence, of a pre-industrial rural society where the Mukhi (Suresh Oberoi) is the figure of authority until the Subedar sets up camp on the village outskirts. He now has to deal with the higher authority and yet, maintain his dignity before the overawed locals. Subservience to authority is built into the village ethos. Men are content to uphold this patriarchal rule, be it from their own Mukhi or the overpowering Subedar who awes them with his official paraphernalia and accoutrements. Naseeruddin Shah plays the Subedar as a flamboyant tyrant, his persona and bearing border on the hyperbolic. Ketan Mehta maintains that the officers of erstwhile maharajas easily lent themselves to caricature, so exaggerated was their self-importance in a feudal society. Trust Mehta to humanize the braggart with the touch of an aesthete: he loves to play his favourite songs on the gramophone, a magical instrument that leaves the villagers dumbstruck. The dramatic confrontation is set up when the Subedar spies Sonbai's bareback through his opera glasses. We see the dynamics of a double gaze at work: he sees her exposed back and we see it through his gaze. The device of making us see Sonbai's sensuous form and once again as the Subedar's object of desire enhances her desirability quotient. Film-makers employ this double gaze to magnify the appeal. Aparna Sen uses the interplay between two cameras in *Paroma*to subversive effect, awakening Rakhee's consciousness of herself as a desired woman.

The Subedar accosts her, picking her out from the women who are fetching water from the stream. '*Is janwar ko bhi paani denge agar woh jhuke toh*' is Sonbai's tart retort. An enduring image from a film full of stunning images is the Subedar, in all his mustachioed glory, kneeling at her upright figure, as she pours water into his cupped hands. This image connects to our visual history and oral narrative tradition. The difference is that Mehta and his cameraman Jahangir Chowdhury subvert something that has both erotic and mythic resonance into a play of role reversals. He is obviously more powerful with his official status, overweening masculinity, flaunting his pomp and

circumstance. Sonbai suggests that by holding her own and putting him down verbally and reducing him to kneeling position, she is asserting her woman power, fully aware of what could ensue. Only Smita's aggressive body language – seemingly pliant but self-assertive at the same time – could convey so much through her stance, her magnificent eyes flashing fire.

From then on, Sonbai becomes the object of his obsessive lust. When he arrogantly approaches her, certain that she will comply, her fierce stinging slap before the villagers rouses his wrath. Smita's subtle swagger spells defiance against the Subedar's exaggerated swagger of tyrannical machismo. Sonbai's slap is like Draupadi's mocking laughter. Jolted by this humiliating insult, the enraged Subedar sends his men on horseback to capture and deliver the insolent woman.

The metaphor of the red chilli – seen earlier as a single luscious chilli hanging like a decorative motif while the opening credits come on – now gets expanded into mounds of heaped red chillies, their colour seeping into the brown soil and the earth tones of the women's clothes. Sonbai creeps between the mounds with athletic grace and the stealth of an endangered animal. She then runs in desperation to comparative safety. Thwarted yet again, the Subedar delivers an ultimatum: hand over Sonbai or I will burn down the village.

It is inevitable that the village turns against Sonbai. She does not have the protection of a husband and even otherwise, she has never been the submissive sort. Poverty or the absence of her husband at a critical time in no way diminishes her stature. Her very bearing speaks of her self-respect and defiance of injustice. She is aware of their resentment and fear but that does not allow her to submit to such arbitrary demands. Her honour and selfhood are not to be bartered. As the Subedar bides his time, anger builds up against her. Only the Gandhian schoolmaster – who struggles to explain the concept of freedom to a people who have never known it – and Saraswati (Deepti Naval, a brilliant cameo), the Mukhi's wife, are sympathetic. Saraswati has her own battle to fight. Her husband does not bother to hide his mistress and expects her to shut up and put up. She is resolved to get her young daughter an education and enrols her in the village school against her husband's express diktat. She fails but the sparks of rebellion are igniting in the hitherto submissive women.

While the village men dither and bargain for time, Sonbai shuts herself up in the masala factory on the outskirts. Mehta invests the stone-walled, huge, wooden-gated structure with the dimensions of a fabled fortress. Sonbai and the other women who pound the chillies in that enclosed fort-like space wait in trepidation while negotiations are going on between a worried Mukhi and obdurate Subedar.

The other women are initially hostile to Sonbai. Then the chain of

events inside the factory, as women gossip, quarrel, then make up, sets up its own dynamics. A woman has an epileptic fit and it is Sonbai who knows what to do, and take care of her. Saraswati brings a bundle of chapattis and the appreciative women inside say that only another woman can think of providing food. A pregnant woman goes into labour and the resourceful women deliver a baby girl. This unites them as nothing else can and lifts their spirit.

All through this mini cycle of life, old Abu Miyan (Om Puri, dignity personified), the guard of the factory, watches over his charges with gritty courage even as he grumbles. Mukhi along with other men of the village try to talk Sonbai into surrender but she refuses: 'I won't go to him even if my husband asked me to.' In a firm voice resounding with steely determination, Sonbai declares, 'I will die rather than go.' The tyrant at the door lays siege and threatens to break it down. Abu Miyan does his namaaz, loads his rusty gun and waits to do his duty of protecting the women. The horde breaks through, Abu Miyan is martyred and in a spontaneous upsurge, a wave of women rushes forward to blind the men with chilli powder, staining the screen red.

In retrospect, you know this is a temporary triumph. But the moment sweeps you up to a mythic level of blinding splendour, a choreographed act becomes the victorious dance of woman power. It gives birth to the legend, of once upon a time lived a strong, passionate woman, Sonbai. Her final image is that of unblinking eyes, eyes that are iconic like a Devi's. An unforgettable image of Smita that does not deify her in an unthinking fashion but haloes the courage of an ordinary woman with an extraordinary hint of immortality. Smita makes the mythic Sonbai vibrantly alive, bringing an intellectual and emotional response to Ketan Mehta's highly stylized, sophisticated vision. Sonbai emerges as the legendary figure who inspired women to defy the tyrant and lives to tell the tale.

A spectacular film of immense, enduring power becomes a signpost, a reference point for films that come later. In *Parzania*(Rahul Dholakia's 2005 film based on a real-incident during the Gujarat riots), the fascist hordes battering down the massive door of a complex where Muslims and other minorities live, recall the image of the Subedar's minions breaking down the door and riddling Abu Miyan's body with bullets. Political convenience and short memories might try to obliterate or explain away such urban massacres. But the paradoxical plasticity of a film image contains in itself the power to transcend its immediate context and resonate over time to a new reality. The image becomes a slate and storehouse of collective conscience, of public memory.You cannot watch *Mirch Masala* today without connecting it to 2002 and the Gulbarg killings. Film is a custodian of history and keeper of conscience.

Mirch Masala was a dazzling poster for our resurgent New Cinema on the international circuit. Talking about her performance, Rita Kempsky wrote in the *Washington Post*: 'Acclaimed for her portraits of exploited women, Patil gives an enigmatically feisty performance. If she and the film-maker weren't so able and the backdrop not so exotic, *Spices* would be little more than an ineffectual rant. There is a grunting ruthlessness to the drama, a vibrancy of character and moral obstinacy that compare favourably with Akira Kurosawa's admittedly more elegant samurai movies.'

Mirch Masala was shot near Rajkot. The original title was to be 'Garam Masala', but luckily something as pedestrian as packaged garam masala gave way to the inspirational, far more evocative title. It is a title that makes you inhale the red chilli's pungency and its sizzling flavour scorches the mouth with delicious fire.

Amole Gupte has fond memories of Smita from the shoot. Archana, Ketan Mehta's first wife, was the costume designer and she was nine months' pregnant then. Amole was her assistant along with Aditya Lakhia and Raj. The young men were around twenty-two at that time. The three assistants were in Room 101 of Hotel Mohit in Rajkot, the base where everyone was put up. 'All the art cinema icons were without masks. The Bollywood stars had their usual airs,' Amole remembers. The three guys were washing the costumes late at night. At around 1.30, Smita walked into their room. She simply hitched up her skirt, squatted on the bathroom floor and helped rub umber into the clothes to make them look used. Amole still can't get over it. He was in awe of her, having sneaked in to see *Bhumika* and rendered spellbound for life.'She was so easy to talk to, so full of warmth, dropped her guard so naturally. She was comfortable with every unit guy, as a human being so giving to everyone,' he marvels. Smita came to the Chandivali studio after five months when she was pregnant, for the garba sequence. He went to give her costumes and she met him with the same warmth.

There's another story that sheds light on the economics of art cinema. Om Puri initially refused to be part of the film. He was in Mauritius with NFDC Chairman Hrishikesh Mukherjee as part of a film delegation that included Gulzar and Shabana. In Om's words: 'Hrishi-da cornered me and said, *Tune kyon refuse kiya NFDC film? Chalo mere gadi mein baitho*. I said, Dada they give 5,000 or 10,000 for a film. How can we survive? He said, I can understand. I was paid 5,000 for *Jaane Bhi DoYaaron*and the film went on to make 25-30 lakhs but they never called me and said, *chalo* take some money, we gave you so little. Dada gave it a thought. The next day, Hrishi-da told me, *Chalo maine NFDC ko bol diya. Tum*, Naseer, Smita and Shabana will get 75,000 for a film. So they all said, *yaar tumne hamare liye bhi kaam kar*

diya. So *Mirch Masala* had a big budget. Not a fancy budget but it was comfortable.'

Rs 75,000 seems laughable from today's perspective, but that was the maximum NFDC gave at that time. In a way, the iconic quartet of parallel cinema upped the economic ante and benefited the next generation of actors.

6

The Ambivalent Eighties

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.' It is tempting to see analogies of Smita's career in these lines. We most certainly had great expectations from Smita and she lived up to them gloriously. Many landmark films discussed in the last two chapters were made in the 1980s. She added to her repertoire a few others that were socially significant, even if it was the male lead who essayed the protagonist while she played an important role. Some of these films were decent enough, though they fell well short of cinematic excellence or innovation. A lesser actor would be proud of them but then, we are measuring them against Smita's best. We would even be justified in feeling cheated or betrayed by some of the films she did. She had made the choice to straddle two worlds, the parallel and the mainstream. The 1980s saw a dive to a particularly low point in formulaic films. It was a period when the industry churned out the good, bad and ugly with unequal fervour. The good were very few, the bad were many, and the ugly were overwhelming.

It was an uneasy ride through the decade, balancing the epochal impact of films like *Bhavni Bhavai*, *Chakra*, *Umbartha*, *Arth*, *Tarang* and *Mirch Masala* against the mindless mediocrity of *Badle Ki Aag*, not to speak of an execrable *Haadsa* and *Kaanch Ki Deewar*. Luckily, there were the in-between exceptions and exceptional forays into regional films, like Aravindan's *Chidambaram*. Smita's very presence commands

us to source and scramble, to find forgotten films like *Anokha Rishta* and *Anand Aur Anand.* So, to paraphrase Betty Davis's famous warning – fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy six- year ride. To follow a strict chronological order is confusing because sometimes, you have films of all kinds made in the same year. Trying to find a pattern in the choices she made is impossible.

The decade began brilliantly. Smita was cast in a Satyajit Ray film, though her role was not central. She got the recognition that most actors working in art cinema so ardently desire, even if they shied away from expressing it openly. Piroj Wadia, interviewing Smita, asked her soon after *Bhumika* as to how she would like to work with Satyajit Ray. Piroj remembers how she let out an audible gasp of joy: 'I'd love to, and after all, he's the ultimate in any actress's ambition.' An ambition she was to realize soon enough. Ray made the first telefilm, *Sadgati* (1981), in Hindi for Doordarshan. Ray, the critic, had keenly watched the rise of parallel cinema, so much of it directly inspired and indirectly influenced by his own pioneering work. The relationship between the master and the next generation who owed him an immense debt is rather ambivalent, because Ray was also one of the best film critics in the country who did not spare even his own acolytes when they went wrong. For his short film based on Munshi Premchand's story, he picked two of the finest exponents of the Indian New Wave. Sandip Ray says his father wanted to work with Smita after he saw *Bhumika*and *Manthan*. He was fond of her acting, and this fondness soon extended to Smita as a person. 'It was a dream to work with her. She was absolutely professional.' Encomiums indeed from Ray, father and son.

Sadgati (Deliverance) is a relentless, naked exposé of the oppressive caste system prevalent in rural India. 'Sunil Ganguli has described it as Ray's"cruellest" film,' writes Andrew Robinson in his definitive book on the films of Ray, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*. Ray himself said: '*Sadgati* is a deeply angry film, but it is not the anger of an exploding bomb, but of a bow stretched taut and quivering.' Om Puri and Smita Patil are the inevitable choice to play the untouchable couple who approach the priest to perform the necessary rites for their young daughter's betrothal. About the casting, Robinson, writes: 'In casting Om Puri as Dukhi and Smita Patil as Jhuria, Ray selected the *finest actor and actress of the post-Independence generation*. [The emphasis is mine.] In *Deliverance*, both of them are able to convey with searing truth the struggle of poor people to remain human under inhuman pressures; there can be no higher praise than to say that their performances are on par with Chunibala Devi's in Ray's first film. Neither of them have a conventionally attractive face … but both have the rare capacity of transforming their appearance according to

mood.'

The wily, well-fed Brahmin (Mohan Agashe) calls Dukhi (Om Puri) for a day's arduous labour, and denies the poor man food all day. Dukhi has just recovered from fever and has no time to eat before he sets out for the priest's house, much to the anxiety of his worried wife Jhuria (Smita). He tells her to keep all the items required for the sagai and sets off. Jhuria is a simple woman. The way Smita memorizes the list – one seer aata, half seer chawal… – and keeps getting them mixed up and corrects herself with a little laugh is endearing. After doing sundry other jobs, Dukhi is given a huge log of wood to chop before the Brahmin deigns to come to his house and perform the ritual. Om Puri uncomplainingly does the exhausting work as the indolent priest takes a nap after a sumptuous meal. Dukhi collapses and dies. Ray films this tragic oppression with a brutal kind of honesty that is edged with occasional sardonic humour. The disposal of a lower-caste's dead body by the Brahmin is the dilemma – it reminds us of the Kannada classic *Samskara* – that reaches an impasse. A tribal who has seen Dukhiya collapse warns men of his caste not to help dispose the body. It is the Brahmin's nemesis and let him deal with it.

When Jhuria learns of her husband's death, her anguish can only be conveyed physically; she falls to the ground against a herd of cattle. She is reduced to the state of mute cattle. Earlier, we see her sitting against the wall, dozing as the young girl plays hopscotch in the yard. She has been waiting for Dukhi to come home with the priest. Instead, she runs to the front yard of the priest's house where her husband's corpse lies, abandoned by the heartless caste hierarchy. She weeps over it in utter despair. The Brahmin drags the corpse, a rope tied to its leg, all the way across the outskirts of the village, to leave it beside a dead buffalo and other animal skulls. You don't see Jhuria again. The final brutality deepens the hopelessness of her fate. In terms of the centrality of roles and screen time, *Sadgati* is Om Puri and Mohan Agashe's film. But Smita leaves her imprint as the innocent victim of a fate that is decided by the capricious cruelty of others. By now, Smita has mastered the art of making her presence felt, even if she doesn't utter a word and seems to melt in the shadows.

Om Puri recalls how Ray changed his shooting format for this scene. He had already made his shot division. The afternoon was overcast and rain was imminent. Smita was to leave Raipur by train that evening, to reach Nagpur from where she would fly to Bombay, and then onward to New York. Smita was part of the delegation for the Festival of India in New York. Ray, calling out in Bangla (Om's detailed recollection), quickly got a 100- foot trolley track laid and shot Smita's scene where she runs to her husband's dead body in two

long takes, while it was raining. Ray made the fortuitous change to accommodate Smita's travel schedule. It added to the poignancy of the scene, as the heavens weep for the disinherited on this earth. As Om recalls, the rain stopped soon after the shot was over. The weather gods helped a master to improvise for better effect.

The Festival of India was an ambitious exposition, by our Festival Directorate, of the history and range of Indian cinema for the first time in the US. It had three sections: past, contemporary, and the third exclusively devoted to Satyajit Ray. The contemporary section was titled 'The New Generation' (1960 to 1980) and featured nineteen films (Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali and Hindi). What is significant is the number of films that Smita was part of: *Akaler Sandhane, Bhavni Bhavai, Chakra, Manthan, Bhumika, Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai, Aakrosh* and *Sarvasakshi.*

The cover of the festival brochure (of this section) illustrates Smita's overwhelming presence. The illustration by Zahid Sardar is a stylized Y, suggestive of the Indian subcontinent with a narrow stem starting from the wide Hindi heartland, the upper regions left open. The wide apex is filled with Smita's unmistakable face awash in earthy beige, a huge red bindi slightly smudged and blazing like the sun. One narrowed eye pins you with its intense gaze. On the left is a series of small, blurred faces in grey going down the narrow stem, their features indistinct. Yes, a picture says more than a thousand words.

So taken was Ray with Smita for her acting skills and warm personality that she was the first choice when it came to the television series, *Satyajit Ray Presents* (1985). A homecoming of sorts for an actor who started on DD news. Acting for a short film demands a different kind of discipline. Like the writer, the actor too has to master the craft of evocative economy that maximizes impact without the luxury of long-drawn drama. Smita proved her mettle on the small screen again, this time in the demanding span of twenty-three minutes, under the Ray banner. The two-part TV series *Satyajit Ray Presents* was directed by his son Sandip Ray but the majority of the scripts were written by Ray Senior. Ray's brilliance as a writer, known to Bengal's children for years, emerges in this series of precisely dramatic, often elliptical and richly textured short teleplays that explored many themes.

The concluding story, *Abhinetri*, was based on Narendranath Mitra's story (Satyajit Ray's favourite author who also wrote *Mahanagar*). It was the best, not just from the viewer's point of view but also in Satyajit Ray's own estimation. With great finesse, this short film combined human drama, irony and the unexpected behaviour of an ordinary person under stress. Smita played a traditional housewife who is petrified by the film camera when a director wants to cast her in his project. But she acts brilliantly in real life, with every fibre of

her being, purely by instinct, driven by the need to save her husband's honour. It was a lesson in concentrated histrionics, of portraying a shy woman's intuitive ability to enact a different reality, blind to the irony of it all. Smita ignited this kinetic tension, between 'acting' as a conscious performance and instinct-driven creation of an alternative reality. Sandip Ray says they were inundated by phone calls from all over India about how much they loved the series and *Abhinetri* in particular. It was made in 1985, before YouTube and email. I remember the late critic Iqbal Masud raving over Smita's performance. Sandip Ray remembers that Smita was technically accomplished, so it was easy to work with her. They rarely needed two takes; it was mostly accomplished in a single take. Sandip Ray recalls Smita as exceptional at dubbing, she was so quick. Though it was for TV, Ray shot it in 35 mm. One only hopes that DVDs of this series come out in the market. Today's viewers can then see another dimension of Smita's talent.

The year 1980 also marked the arrival of Govind Nihalani, the top-class cinematographer who learnt his craft from the legendary V.K. Murthy, into the forefront of important directors. Unsurprisingly, Smita was part of *Aakrosh*, though hers is a powerful cameo that provides emotional ammunition for a narrative driven by the twin engines of crime investigation and negotiating hair-splitting legalities. Tendulkar's explosive script describes the struggle of a rookie defence lawyer appointed to defend Bhiku, a tribal accused of murdering his wife Nagi (Smita), against the miasma of a mofussil town's power nexus where the police, prosecutors, politicians and big contractors are all in cahoots to bend the system to their advantage. Kulkarni, the young lawyer (Naseeruddin Shah plays the thwarted, bull- dog tenacious lawyer to harried perfection), discovers that Bhiku (Om Puri investing the character's stubborn muteness with infinite meanings) has been set up by the cabal of politicians and contractors who raped his young wife and threw the body in a well. Nihalani masters the art of combining the suspense of a crime thriller with the disturbing moral and social issues implicit in the script. Other than Smita, there are hardly any women in the film. She has brief, sharply poignant appearances that Bhiku recalls in his incarceration. Images of Nagi haunt him as he lies on the floor of the cell, writhing with the anguish of memories. Nihalani clarifies that Nagi was a human being first, a tribal later. With a Tendulkar script, you don't think of a character as a symbol – Nagi as a victim whose fate enrages her husband – but as a person with her own web of relationships.'I don't look at the plot first. I look at the characters. I must remember her as a person. If she haunts me, she will haunt the viewer,' Nihalani spells out his credo. To read characters as symbols comes later in analysis. The brief but

intensely felt memories flesh her out as an individual. Nagi is innocent, almost naive and also brimming with passion. Smita and Nihalani convey all this in three scenes.'Smita was a perfectionist,' Nihalani affirms.

First, Nagi turns on Bhiku like a tigress when he accuses her of going to the big maalik's house. She says in all innocence: the maalik made her sit on a chair, gave biscuits and a new sari too. Bhiku attacks her furiously: Saali, you are happy with that, aren't you? You know what he will want next time? That memory fills him with helpless guilt. Then come the lovemaking scenes in close-ups. Nagi is wild with passion. Her fingers dig into his shoulders, teeth bared for an open kiss, head arched back as he kisses her neck. There is a raw sexuality on display, as she bites and claws her husband in the throes of passion. Smita has shed her inhibitions by now, because the film demands her to show the depth of Bhiku's love, and the subsequent rage that paradoxically reduces him to silent suffering, not saying a word in his own defence or helping his lawyer in any way. Smita did not have any ego hang-ups in doing what many would consider a minor role, not befitting her star status. She has her significant place in the emotional graph of this most disturbing film. Bhiku's climactic anguished cry still echoes through our collective film memory and rage at Smita's violent end is embedded in that cry.

Smita had no prudish issues doing the intimate scenes. Om Puri says: 'She was very comfortable doing those scenes. We both trusted each other. Govind has shot it very beautifully. With a lot of hair spilling over our faces. And the music enhances the scene. I remember Govind was a little greedy. He left us on the floor and was moving the camera. She was down and I was above her. The camera went on shooting. Then she shouted, "*Arre Govind, bas kar re*!"' Om remembers another incident that was scary. 'There was a scene when I slap her. During the rehearsal, I was doing it very gently. Then just before the shot, Govind came up to me and said, Om give her one hard slap. I was very scared, and then I hit her. The poor thing, she had to sleep for an hour because my hand fell on her ear, instead of her cheek. That is very dangerous. After that, I have always remembered it. In mainstream Hindi films, we never really slap someone on the cheek. The camera position is such that it looks as if it is a slap. But in realistic films, they don't want to cheat. So I was standing in front of her door, waiting for her to wake up and apologize. When she came out, I said I am very sorry. I did not mean to hurt. Govind told me to slap you … and she hugged me and said, "Don't be silly. I just got hurt and went to sleep."'

Nihalani's second film is the seminal *Ardh Satya* (1982) where it is Om Puri's turn now to play the protagonist and Naseeruddin Shah

provides an antithetical cameo. Again, Smita had no qualms in playing a secondary role that offers a very significant point of view against the emotional flow of the hero's descent into violence. The half-truths of a time of political corruption encircle a sensitive cop's struggle against the brutalizing forces of the system, like the mythical chakravyuh, the death trap from which there is no escape. The brutalization of Anand Velankar, son of an authoritarian small-town policeman and a gentle, long-suffering mother, is a metaphor for our times that works at psychological (the most honest exploration of the Oedipal complex in Indian cinema), dramatic and political levels with equal power. Smita plays Jyotsna, a college lecturer who is drawn to Anand against her better judgement and intuitive mistrust. Jyotsna offers the intellectual counterpoint to the film's argument, an ideologically strong alternative to the script's powerful premise: the police-judicial system is an inherently corrupting, brutalizing machine. It rouses, reinforces and condones the flawed hero's violent impulses till he goes over the edge, and then, condemns him to be yet another victim. The ultimate irony is that the petty local crook with political connections starts off as the protagonist's nemesis and becomes his alter ego. However much Anand Velankar wants to get out of this vicious circle of escalating, self-destructive violence and find refuge in Jyotsna's sane (and safe?) world of intellectual activism, the no-exit trap snaps shut. Smita plays Jyotsna as a woman with strong convictions, not willing to let her heart rule her head. She is always in a starched white sari, only the borders provide colour. She has an inherent distrust of going with the moment. When Anand takes her to an expensive restaurant, she is shocked by the price of a cup of tea – six rupees! Jyotsna will not let him splurge on a taxi, they can as well take a bus to her hostel. She is appalled when Anand thrashes a fellow passenger who brushes against Jyotsna. She cannot understand, nor condone, such explosions of rage. This only reinforces her reservations against getting involved with a policeman: you can't separate a man from what he does for a living. Though Jyotsna is conceived as an ideological alternative, Smita fleshes out the character with a credible girl-next-door pragmatism. The only difference being, this girl-next-door is not the roti-and-baby-making anodyne offering domestic bliss, but an academic liberal. She is the kind of woman who will educate herself fully on any issue, even civil liberties and police excesses in the guise of upholding the law.

Jyotsna does know the sensitive man under the uniform, the man who wanted to study literature. She carries a book of poetry, her favourite poems flagged. Anand reads out the poem at the restaurant. It is by Dilip Chitre and beautifully articulates *Ardh Satya*'s thesis and antithesis. She hears him with raptness, as his baritone softens to enunciate the existential dilemma of being trapped in a chakravyuh:

Before entering the circular death trap
Who was I? What was I?
I will not remember
Once I enter.
After entering the circular death trap
I will not even realize
How excruciatingly close were we:
Myself and the enemy.
Maybe I will even be able to free myself
From the circular death trap;
But the nature of the trap will never change…
Shall I die? Or shall I kill?
Shall I be the victim or the assassin?
This can never be settled.
The light in which decisions are made,
Does it render all things equal?
Impotence is weighed against manhood:
And the pointer of the balance fixed on a half-truth.

The light in which Jyotsna makes her decision is not clouded by moral ambivalence. She attends a civil liberties seminar (where incidentally, Shanta Gokhale, writer and eminent culture critic, makes her speech). Her decision is unequivocal. A policeman will not be a part of her life. And this clear-eyed, coldly rational decision comes after she had met him halfway, when he apologizes for his drunken call the previous night. They are sitting across a table. Anand is getting emotional and promises to avoid violence. She reaches out and holds his hand. This was a crucial scene that Nihalani was unsure of how to end. The conversation was essential but how to bring closure? While rehearsing, Smita spontaneously put out her hand in a tentative gesture of reassurance. Nihalani found the answer he was looking for. Om Puri points out that Nihalani has spoken often of this incident. The important fact is, in Nihalani's male-centric cinema, he found space for a strong woman who takes a principled stand. He does admit that critics have found fault with his films for not having central female characters. But in Smita, he found an actor who contributed immensely to voice the emotional or intellectual counterpoint that was necessary to balance his dramaturgy. A sidelight to the Nihalani connection that never came to pass. Nihalani wanted to cast her in his path- breaking *Tamas* but Smita was pregnant by then. He did not want to subject her to the rigours of shooting.

Fame brings its own perils. Almost every major director of parallel cinema clamoured to work with this brilliant actor whose performance

matched her promise. From the side-lines, mainstream cinema, shaken out of smug belief in its own invulnerability but putting on a show of indifference to art films, watched with growing interest the amazing appeal of an actress who did not conform to the industry's conventional ideas of prettiness. Meanwhile, parallel cinema did create niche audiences, not all of whom were from the usual film festival circuit. This hard-to-define segment of cinemagoers had waited long and patiently enough for something different: real stories about real people told with conviction, a fair amount of complexity and a degree of social relevance that probed some of Indian society's perennial problems in a non-preachy way. Sure, some films did lapse into formulaic didacticism of the parallel kind, but that is inevitable in any new, loosely structured movement largely dependent on quasi-government funding and blocked off from regular theatrical release by the astronomical costs determined by commercial cinema.

Smita was in the thick of this dilemma, buffeted by demands and counter demands on all sides. Her tremendous screen presence was matched by her willingness to work with new directors, who had only their commitment and ideas to commend them. Smita was willing to lend the credibility of her name to total unknowns, risking failure at worst and ridicule for foolhardy trust at best. But loyalty to a project was paramount, once she had committed her time and talent. This was a fundamental article of faith till the end, and Smita played the centrepiece in two films, one that got a bad release and another that never got beyond a preview audience. All that mattered was that she believed in the film, its theme and the director. The films are *Situm* and *Giddh*. They need detailed assessment for yet another facet of Smita's magnificent obsession with the art and craft of acting in films that challenge stereotypes.

That she made this choice, call it dedication, is admirable. And also expected of her. What is more difficult to understand, let alone completely accept, is Smita's headlong plunge into commercial cinema, without any discernible discrimination. Smita was not the only actor in this tough situation. Her confreres from art cinema also struggled with this dilemma. Everyone had to make a decent living. You can't live on acclaim and awards alone. The other, rather ingenious, argument put forth by almost all of them including Smita was that this was one way of enlarging the audience for art cinema once its actors became stars of mainstream films. It is a pretty valid argument because it is the parallel cinema actors who were accepted and even embraced by commercial film-makers, whereas the directors had to plough a lonely furrow. Then, and to this day, the jhola-hanging-from-khadi-kurta-clad-shoulder intellectual art film director is a target of not very clever, often unsubtle satire. It revealed

commercial cinema's smugness and unconscious envy. Actors like Smita carried a double burden. On one hand are accusations of betraying art for money. On the other, is the expectation that somehow, magically, Smita would be able to raise a film from its mediocre moorings with her redeeming presence. Considering some of the utterly trashy films Smita acted in, this was a task beyond even her kind of undoubted genius.

Alternative reality of this other kind was infiltrating her life. Whatever its perception of parallel cinema's intellectual merit and artistic credibility, the mainstream industry was jolted out of its complacency by the growing popularity of these award- winning new icons. Awards, the art film fraternity was welcome to keep, while *they* counted the cash flow. But even some diehard mainstream film-makers saw the potential of Smita Patil. The commercial success of *Chakra* had made Smita a viable box- office proposition. Smita was gradually overcoming her reservations against the mainstream behemoth. With trepidation and jangled nerves – so awkwardly visible in her first commercial release, *Badle Ki Aag* (1982), a laughable gore fest of the Rajkumar Kohli kind – Smita ventured into this other cinema, with the eagerness of a fascinated child bemused by a new game.

A little explanation is needed why *Badle Ki Aag* is constantly mentioned as an example of Neanderthal film-making that appalled Smita's fans. It is a multi-starrer revenge rampage with good and bad dacoits, where families are separated and children get mislaid with the bewildering carelessness of an absent- minded woman who leaves parcels behind on a shopping binge. So very different from the ensemble art films she did. Smita plays Bijli, a bad daku's daughter in love with the good daku Shera (Dharmendra) since childhood when the lost kid joins the gang. The heroine is Geeta (Reena Roy), brought up as a tawaif, someone all three leading men are in love with. Bijli is taunted as Kali Kaluti and Kali Nagin by Shera, who is obsessed with Geeta's fair charms. Smita's first big foray makes her dark complexion both a term of belittlement and admiration for her daring ways. She is given weird Western outfits in eye-hurting colours, and when she performs a dance with Reena Roy, in the mandatory tight short sari, she is made to sport a white feather in her hair. She pulls off the old bed trick on Shera and finally wins him over by presenting him with a son. The siren who stops at nothing and schemes to get the rival out of the way ends up in a chaste white sari at the end when Shera gets out of prison. The film rants and raves in completely predictable fashion as the plot winds up and down time-worn ways.

The surprise element is provided by Smita with her 'amoral' ways and bold display of dusky sex appeal. It is almost as if once a director

like Kohli got her to do the film, he had to be really inventive to get the best out of Smita's conventionally unconventional role of the good-bad girl. Even more troubling is how Smita repeatedly asks Shera the reason for not reciprocating her all-consuming love. Is it because she is dark and Geeta is fair? *Badle Ki Aag* is so bad that it is interesting. The semiotics of dark versus fair female sexuality might even be part of a doctoral thesis for a film studies scholar, if and when they run out of subjects.

Why did Smita show such utter lack of discrimination when signing commercial films? It takes time to find your footing in a different milieu once the decision is made to venture into new territory. Smita's father and some of her friends – Jhelum Paranjape and Lalita Tamhane – hint at the tremendous hurt Smita felt when an eminently successful director of viable art films promised her a role that she immediately fell in love with. Later, she learnt from a press report that the role had gone to a rival. She was left to infer that the other actor was commercially more successful. Lalita claims that Smita just closeted herself for eight days, hurting over what she considered betrayal. Or is it rejection? She emerged from her self-imposed isolation and signed 'two of the most stupid films in a day,' says Lalita. She wanted to prove that she could be a mainstream star. From the hindsight of today, it may all seem trivial and petty to brood and agonize over the matter. It is all par for the course, something that was routine in showbiz. It is easy to be civilized and rational now. Be cool and non-judgemental about the politics of parallel cinema. But if you pause to reflect objectively, it is so true of the intense struggle for the very few roles in films that were often in danger of not being completed or not released after they were made against huge odds. Yes, there was bonhomie, a shared faith in a certain kind of cinema but it was a closed-circuit race where there was a constant scramble for intensely coveted roles. Some played the game well and there were others like Smita, who was not adept at this skill of marketing herself, her talent, and clinch deals. Or, as her sister Anita observed time and again, Smita just lacked that competitive edge. Given all these caveats, it is amazing how quickly she found herself paddling furiously in two streams simultaneously. In the last three to four years before she died so heartbreakingly young, Smita's mainstream film count outstripped her parallel cinema roles. But the amazing fact remains. Art or mainstream, Smita was a magnet to film-makers hopelessly in love with her screen presence and the wonderful woman behind the image.

Fortunately, there are only a couple of films of the *Badle Ki Aag* variety because commercial cinema found out soon enough that Smita with an air of gravitas was a better draw. Before gravitas enveloped her completely in a slew of mainstream melodramas, mostly with Raj

Babbar, there is a singular example of Smita cast as a flighty teenager in a stock melodrama with comic overtones. *Chatpatee* (1983), written by Rahi Masoom Raza, was directed by V. Ravindra and was to showcase Dr Shriram Lagu's dramatic range. He is Ram, loyal right hand of feudal landlord Laxman, and takes the rap for his boss for a flare-up in a Panchayat election. From being a best friend to an alcoholic, bitter cynic is a leap of imagination the script wants us to take. Who are we to complain if the film wants easy shortcuts so that it can drown us in the pity and irony of it all? Wait, we have an epic twist to a revered figure. This is a Ram who kidnaps the erstwhile friend's baby daughter to bring her up as a cheery pickpocket. This is his idea of revenge, because he thinks his wife cheated on him with his friend. No marks for guessing. The wife is a true Sati Savitri and the child he has kidnapped is his own daughter. Naturally, he doesn't know his wife was pregnant when he went to jail.

Smita is the only bright spot in this muddling, murky melodrama where the hamming stakes are high. She is a scruffy girl in cut-off jeans, a striped T-shirt, red scarf and ragged sneakers. Her unkempt hair is in two braids, a fringe falls distractingly into her eyes. She sings cheerfully, '*Main hoon madam chatpatee, hoon main badi natkhati*', as she goes about snaffling wallets, cheating another gullible sort with the survival instincts of a waif. A bit of Robin Hood too, because she gives money to a sick woman, then pulls off what she calls trick no. 16. She talks to the picture of a goddess on the wall and upbraids her: What kind of a mother are you? She is justified because all she gets for filching money to buy her grumpy old man drink is abuse and threat of violence. Her favourite word 'saala' peppers her speech and she can take care of herself from guys who think she is easy prey. We can see Smita's total enjoyment in playing this perky petty thief with her heart in the right place.

Into this not-so-happy life – even though Chatpatee tries to present a happy-go-lucky face – comes Pratap, scion of Laxman's family. The love story proceeds along predictable lines and she pretties up for him, transforming from the untidy urchin look. What is not predictable is how she ends up in a kotha, sold to a madam in a drunken fit by Ram. Smita unleashes mayhem with infectious high spirits. Deepti Naval, who never got to see *Chatpatee*, remembers how Smita told her gleefully of dancing drunkenly in a kotha, in a bright yellow ghagra. There is this predilection for the colour yellow that connects Smita, Shabana and Deepti. Shabana advised Deepti that yellow was her colour. She shared this information with Smita and the two friends discovered they both liked shades of yellow. Say yellow, and it was a code word between them. Bhawana Somaaya also remarked on Smita and Shabana's fondness for yellow – to the extent

that both had yellow doors in their homes.

Coming back to *Chatpatee*, Smita revels in playing the comic disrupter with gusto. She pretends to be mad when being forcibly married off. She dances, jumps, kicks and runs before taking off on a parody hit parade, from '*Mohe panghat pe nandlal*' to using a shehnai as a trumpet, a walking stick as a guitar. Earlier too, there is a send-up of a tawaif 's woes, singing a sad song against a flickering candle in full gaudy regalia. The comic timing and obvious zest Smita brings to playing this chirpy, naughty, never- say-die pickpocket makes her scenes totally watchable. The rest of it is hackneyed melodrama. Everyone close to her speaks of Smita's fun side but hardly any film-maker explored this side of her personality. That is why *Chatpatee* is all spice – like Chowpatty's bhelpuri.

The 1980s do see her struggle to fit into the straitjacket of formulaic films even as she delivered some astoundingly brilliant performances in the cinema closest to her heart and mind. The Smita saga gets as complex as some of her best films. She worked at feverish pace and heightened pitch, often chalking up three and even four films a year. The disciplined pace of parallel film-making, most often shot on location from start to finish (unless finance dried up or weather played foul), helped, but it was still arduous. Smita was like the proverbial candle burning at both ends – and the middle, too.

This true child of the art cinema mould was a quick learner. She could never project the bimbette's vacuity and swivel her hips to the seductive beat of a chartbuster. And to be fair, neither did the mainstream directors, except Prakash Mehra, ask her for it once they cast her. Smita was to provide the cachet of 'art'; her task was to enhance the heroine's credibility with a different realism. It is no coincidence that both Prakash Mehra and Ramesh Sippy cast her opposite the megastar Amitabh Bachchan, and made her screen character a loner, a working girl without the usual family anchorage. Bachchan was an admirer of Smita's talent as was the other superstar from the south, Kamalahaasan. Whether this admiration eased Smita's awkward entry into the mainstream is open to question.

In an interview to the popular video magazine *Lehren*, Amitabh Bachchan said: 'Smita was a very, very dear friend. On the many occasions we spent together, we talked. She had a great understanding of the kind of work she wanted to do. She was very apprehensive of the escapist cinema I was associated with and therefore when she got the first opportunity to work with me … she was so confused … so scared. What am I doing here? She said, please help me out. How do I do this … I am going to look so stupid doing these songs. But gradually she matured.' Amitabh Bachchan tried telling Smita very often that an artiste like her should do mainstream films. 'But she'd

say, I don't fit into it. My world view, view of art is different. Help me, otherwise I can't work in this set up.'*

Namak Halaal (1982) was a vehicle solely meant to showcase Amitabh Bachchan's comic talent, usually subsumed by the all- in-one, all-things-to-all-people archetype that would brood, fight, woo, and also provide the necessary comic relief. The waiter–hero of Prakash Mehra's super hit is fanatically loyal to his master, the owner of the hotel, and thwarts the villains at every turn, with a combination of cunning and comic timing. Plus fisticuffs, of course. Smita is Poonam, the pretty front office clerk, a city girl this bumbling rustic falls for. She is initially pert and puts him down but soon reciprocates, touched by his sincerity. Her entry, during the comic-chaos of '*Pag ghungroo bandh Meera naachi thi*', makes her look lovely with a touch of unexpected sophistication: a silvery sari and strappy blouse, discreet jewellery adding to her glamour. After that, Poonam is in her working clothes, of saris and salwars. She is a middle-class working girl caring for a blind brother, to add a touch of pathos, perhaps to offset objectifying her for the male gaze. The highlight of the Smita's performance, in public memory, is the rain-drenched raunchy song, '*Aaj rapat jaaye*' where she is draped all over a cart in a wet white sari when not prancing on the street. Her supple, dusky midriff adorned with a silver chain is bared to the rain. Smita's inviting smile seems to go slightly awry, as if she is aware in advance of audiences reacting angrily at her capitulation to the formula. After Mehra got his 'item', Smita's screen time is drastically reduced and she is presented decorously as the sincere, eminently suitable bahu material, conveniently at hand to thwart the villains and aid the hero.

Smita is reported to have wept inconsolably (Vidyatai, Lalita and Jhelum affirm this) after the filming of the song. She knew what she had signed up for but did not think it would be this demeaning. It is believable, given how gauche she seems during the filming of an immensely popular hit song. But there is a strangely endearing aspect to her gaucherie. Her embarrassment at all this raunchy cavorting seems to suit the reserved working girl she plays. It perhaps vindicates what Prakash Mehra said about his 'unorthodox' choice: 'I signed her for *Namak Halaal*against all odds. The same people who felt I had committed a blunder, complimented me on the release of the film. It was a glamorous role and she was the right choice.' The vox populi at that time seemed to concur. Amole Gupte remembers a huge poster of Smita occupying almost an entire wall in Mehra's Sumeet studio.

After Smita got over the sense of being besmirched by this raunchy song's mauling, she entertained family and friends with her 'acting' in Bollywood style. Smita had a sense of humour and made a private joke of a public performance. The song dismayed her feminist fans,

because unlike *Chakra*, she participated in crass exploitation of her body. You wonder what she would have made of the indirect validation of the song by a film-maker like Aparna Sen decades later.

The song's hit status is raised to the level of an unlikely quotation in a film that inhabits a totally different universe. That should delight signifier-hunting semioticians. In Aparna Sen's *Mr and Mrs Iyer* (2002), the motley passengers of a bus are stranded in a semi-rural town due to riots. Rahul Bose's sophisticated photographer, a Muslim pretending to be married to Konkona Sen Sharma, the traditional south Indian wife with an infant in arms, spins a facile romantic tale to amuse a gaggle of college girls. The song these girls sing with obvious gusto in the bus is '*Aaj rapat jaaye*'. Aparna Sen slyly acknowledges the power of Bollywood in this remote corner where she set India's sweetly heart-breaking *Brief Encounter*. Such unexpected juxtapositions of the popular and parallel spice up a film's subtext.

One does not know if Smita could have survived a repetition of such roles that at times reduced her sensuality to the status of a sex object – a practice so pervasive in commercial cinema. Thankfully for her, and us, she was given more mature roles that befitted her air of seriousness.

Shakti (1982), her other film with Bachchan, is a minor masterpiece, one of the most underrated Hindi films ever. Ramesh Sippy does some of his finest work as a director and Salim Khan–Javed Akhtar's script builds up the engaging drama of the archetypal father–son conflict with insight, precision and psychological credibility. (It was superior pop psychology that was both intelligent and accessible.) It was a clash of the Titans, Dilip Kumar versus Amitabh Bachchan, with Rakhee playing the mother torn between husband and son. Smita counters the intensity of the dramatic structure around her with a low-key, muted presence that is very effective. We first see Smita as a grey-haired widow, caring for her father-in-law (Dilip Kumar). She gently tries to restrain her newly graduated son Ravi from straining his Dadu when he resolves to tell the young man the stern test of duty he had to face. Smita's slim fingers at the edge of the chairback, as they tighten and clench, are eloquent of her tension at the imminent revelation of the past. Dilip Kumar goes into flashback as Inspector Ashwini Kumar rejoices at the birth of his son Vijay.

Smita's younger version appears after Vijay has almost decided to leave home, the constant battle of wills against his duty- bound father forcing him to rebel. They first meet in a local train, late at night, when he saves her from goons who try to molest her. As he walks her home on a lonely street, Roma asks Vijay: why not inform the police? His reaction to the word 'police' gives her a hint of the demons driving

him. She is sensitive to people's moods and hears the unspoken. She is matter of fact when Vijay asks if her family would be worried because she is coming home late. In her quiet low voice, she says enigmatically: If I am alone, how can I be afraid of myself? Vijay's terse admission, I am afraid of myself, sparks her interest and curiosity. And it also generates trust. She invites him in for coffee but he takes a rain check. She is forthcoming enough to tell him her name, her job as a ghazal singer at a hotel, quietly but unmistakably showing her interest. She is dressed in a cotton sari, with her loose hair falling over her shoulder.

Roma lives alone, there is the absence of a constricting family, to underline her independent status. A character who is confident enough to be herself and enjoy her work, to perform in public and yet be simple and unaffected when not on stage. Smita personifies it to pitch perfection. Roma makes a distinction between her public persona of performer and the quiet, reticent woman in private. When you first see her on stage, singing'*Humne sanam ko khat likha*', she sways and emotes in a slightly exaggerated way, as expected by the semi-private hotel audience. She sits decorously, a gauzy dupatta over her shoulder, red flower in her open cascading hair and bright lipstick. It is demurely seductive. Then she is back to her cotton saris and no make-up simplicity. It is Roma who initiates the friendship with her second invitation to coffee and offers a home to the lonely Vijay who has walked out on his parents. The relationship grows out of shared loneliness into friendship and flowers into love. They do the unconventional thing of the time – share a house before they are married. Roma has absolutely no hang-ups about a male flatmate. Even jokes about a missing 6 ft 2 inch young man last seen in a young woman's company. She cynically observes – who in this busy city has the time to comment on other people's lives? Pretty revolutionary attitude for the times and it sits naturally on her. The lines are well-written, the direction is low key, but the delivery has to be the actor's. Smita exudes the right amount of empathy and capacity to understand a troubled rebel. She brings dignity to what is by mainstream standards an 'unconventional' role.

Even the scene where they consummate their love to the song '*Jaane kaise*' passes through the conventions of running across the meadows, riding, strolling through flowering gardens, swaying on a boat till they get soaked in the lake, wrapped in blankets, exchanging smouldering gazes against a bonfire, before sinking down together. It crackles with the chemistry of two actors known for their intensity. Smita's eyes glow like embers that blaze into a fire. They are dark and deep with desire. Amol Palekar's words come back: 'I haven't seen an actor in the Indian scenario to bring out the intensity so beautifully

and so strongly without uttering a single word. The kind of intensity that Amitabh managed to convey or portray, Smita could do it, I say, even more strongly. Of course Amitabh through his words, through his presence, through his wonderful voice and beautiful Hindi and all those things. She managed to do it through her sheer presence and through her eyes.' Coming from a peer who is also a director, Palekar's observation is worth repeating.

Roma is confident enough to seek her in-laws' blessing even against Vijay's wishes. It is not only tradition but the fact that she is without family that compels her. The wonderfully written and enacted scene when Roma comes to take their blessing underlines Dilip Kumar's tenderness; Rakhee's initial reserve melting into affection calls for an overwhelmed response from Smita. She is overcome by emotion at being accepted as their bahu. Her face is suffused with gratitude. Smita found the right script and director to fit perfectly into a different kind of high- powered ensemble cast.

There are variations of the story of how Smita came to be cast in *Shakti*. Ramesh Sippy calls it a happy accident, a collateral outcome of watching *Manthan* at Javed Akhtar's behest. He was actually looking at Kulbhushan Kharbanda to cast him as the villain in *Shaan*. Rauf Ahmed attributes it to Jaya Bachchan's search for a new heroine for Amitabh. The end result is perfect. Sippy rules out any feeling on Smita's part of being intimidated when she had to act with a legend. She was totally professional and there were no problems, he asserts. Smita's mother has a different story to tell. Smita had not really seen any of Dilip Kumar's films – blasphemy in Bollywood – and she was not diplomatic enough to hide this. Dilip Kumar reportedly was cold – in his innately courteous way – and did not interact more than required with the art film diva. Her tragic death dissolved any reservations he might have had. Jabbar Patel talks of how warmly Dilip Kumar and Saira Banu praised Smita's work when they saw *Umbartha*. Bhawana Somaaya's encyclopaedic knowledge of the industry comes up with this little nugget: Smita meticulously sent thank you notes to all unit members after *Shakti* was completed.

Another Bollywood biggie, Sunil Dutt, occasional director when the theme possessed him, chose Smita to play the dedicated, compassionate doctor in *Dard Ka Rishta* (1982). The film was his way of commemorating his beloved wife Nargis and honouring the doctors who fought so long and hard against the cancer that consumed her. Smita is all crisp professionalism in this well-meaning tearjerker centred around a young girl needing a bone marrow transplant. As always with Smita, you can feel the genuine pain and concern she portrays so affectingly. The film was neither a critical nor commercial success; it congealed into the mess of earnest intentions and lacklustre

execution.

Apprehensions and doubts about tenuous relationships that flout social mores seem to have seeped under Smita's skin when it came to the many films she did with Raj Babbar. More portentously, the trials and emotional tribulations of a love triangle or the stress of a troubled marriage are at the heart of these stories. Smita was being linked to Raj Babbar, with whom she played out the drama of a doomed marriage in the vastly underrated *Bheegi Palkein* (1983). The film opens when an estranged couple, both grey-haired and sombre, meet years later in a school for orphans. He is a government official come to inspect the institution and she is the caring, devoted person in charge. The meeting is pregnant with the past, in a mournful mood of regret at letting life pass them by. Shanti (Smita) says in a heavy voice, devoid of petty accusation: '*Kaun khushi se apna ghar chhodta hai? Chhoot jata hai.*' From this autumnal mood, director Sisir Mishra takes the story back to their youth. He asks pertinent, rather discomfiting, questions about a modern marriage in his quietly persuasive film set in a small town in Orissa. Why does the marriage of two young educated people break down, even when they are childhood sweethearts with the courage of their convictions to brush aside family disapproval, economic disparities and caste barriers? The answer squarely puts the blame on a husband's endemic jealousy, once the safely- ensconced-in-the-aangan wife starts working. Petty pinpricks become insurmountable mountains in his mind. Shanti and Ishwar (Raj Babbar) marry against the wishes of both families. Shanti has been warned by her mother and sister-in-law against marrying into an orthodox, hierarchy-conscious family. She is an educated young woman with strong beliefs and yet, traditional in many ways – god-fearing, even superstitious, wanting to retain the link with her husband's family even though they never treat her as an equal. All the contradictions of a woman torn between modernity and tradition, in short. It is Ishwar who walks out of the parental home when his mother treats Shanti like an outcaste, barred from the kitchen. He is enraged, because it is 'my wife' who is insulted, not Shanti the individual. Shanti defines the two letter word 'ghar' as being made of awareness, feeling and understanding of one another. Not all the money in the world can create a home. She is mature beyond her years, willing to wait patiently for her husband to accept reality and see the substance behind the circumstance.

Ishwar is rather immature and a spendthrift. Shanti decides to work because harsh economic realities underline the need for a second income. She has to bear with his sulking and cutting sarcasm. Ishwar is trapped in inherited male prejudice: working women use their charms to get out-of-turn promotions and indulge in flirting with the

boss. Shanti is wracked with anguish when their little son dies, but instead of support, she is subtly blamed for the tragedy. The film piles one unfortunate incident on top of another to culminate in the son's death. And yet, even as we see the clumsy manipulation, we are poignantly aware of Shanti's grief and loneliness. Ishwar withdraws into an emotional shell. The breaking point comes when he deserts her, going home to his mother, knowing well that she will not follow him there. For a woman who considers marriage a partnership between equals, there can be no reconciliation when a penitent husband meets her years later. Shanti finds fulfilment in looking after orphans, though she continues to sport the insignia of a married woman – sindoor and a mangalsutra. The ending does not violate Shanti's or the film's integrity.

Smita is at her best, blending softness with an innate inviolability. She also looks lovely in gorgeous Oriya handlooms. She triumphs over the too many songs and the director's penchant for melodrama, piling on tragedy by the shovelful. Smita's dignity, in the face of sniggering comments by male colleagues exhibiting all the prejudices of small-town mentality, is an assertion of a woman's inner confidence.

There is a rather touching story told by Sulabha Deshpande about Smita's meticulous memory. Sulabha, who had acted in so many films with Smita, played Ishwar's bhabhi in the film. She is the proud, class and caste-conscious older bahu of the house who spares no chance to humiliate Shanti. During the shoot, there was a scene where Smita could not find the mangalsutra she is supposed to wear. Sulabha gave her own mangalsutra (not part of the film property) for Smita to wear. Somehow or other, the mangalsutra remained with Smita. Sulabha is an unconventional woman, not the traditional mangalsutra-wearing Maharashtrian wife. She and her husband Arvind are pioneers of Marathi experimental theatre. Over a couple of years later, Sulabha realized the mangalsutra was not with her when she had to attend a function and could not recall where she lost it. Teary-eyed, she recalls how Smita, so ill after the birth of her baby, had wrapped up the mangalsutra that was with her and asked that it be returned to Sulabha. And Smita remembered how she had come as a young schoolgirl to the large Dadar flat of Sulabha's father as part of the Rashtra Seva Dal group to rehearse. Sulabha's father was Vasantrao Kamirkar, the main sound recordist of HMV in Bombay. Three flats were joined together and it was open house for dance and drama rehearsals. Sulabha freely admits to approaching dementia but her memory of incidents concerning Smita are sharp.

Bheegi Palkein is significant for the beginning of Smita's association with Deepak Sawant, the make-up expert who is a VIP in his own right. He is currently Amitabh Bachchan's exclusive make-up artist,

who has also produced four Bhojpuri hits in which both Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan acted for free. Deepak was the unit make-up artist on the sets in Orissa. In his own words, he 'had crashed from the twenty-fifth floor to the ground,' when he ceased being Amitabh Bachchan's personal make-up man due to a misunderstanding. It was his job to convince the art film diva that the right make-up was essential in commercial films. She had to project glamour and look beautiful – which meant, toning down her dark skin to at least acceptable 'wheatish' complexion that is the Indian euphemism familiar from matrimonial ads. Deepak says it takes more hard work and ingenuity to make dark look light than the other way. The pancake then in use would make the skin look chalky. He then took pancake that was used in the era of black and white films, with its yellowish tinge, and mixed it with a base that had reddish hues. Combined, the new base lightened Smita's dusky skin to fit conventional standards of screen prettiness.

It was a job for Deepak to convince Smita who wanted the make-up done in her hotel room with its dim lighting. She was adamant that it be done in the hotel. He then opened the bathroom door and luckily found it had a four-foot-long tube light. He improvised a dressing table, using a plywood plank balanced on the washbasin and got down to his art. When Smita went to the set, everyone exclaimed: how beautiful! She then asked for a mirror and took a long hard look at herself.

Orissa was the place where the two bonded. Smita asked Deepak if he would be her personal make-up artist because she had a lot of offers from commercial cinema that she was deliberating over. Deepak says she made her signing these films conditional to his accepting her offer. He asked for a day to consider and then agreed. There was this instinctive trust he evoked in her. Deepak remembers how she walked off alone towards the jungle when she was done with her shots. He quickly followed, cautioning her not to wander off by herself in a new place. She was not escorted by a family member to her location shoots as was the norm with other heroines. 'I know you were following me,' she said cheekily and nothing more needed to be said. Deepak saw himself as her brother, a guardian because she was far too open and guileless.'She said what was in her mind without thinking twice,' he remembers and this often led to arguments. It was a fractious relationship at times, for example, when he quit the shooting of *Waaris* in Haryana after Smita accused him of not doing his work properly. Deepak attributes this outburst to the instigation of a co-star who kept telling Smita that her make-up was not up to standard. The moment Deepak reached Bombay, he realized that he was wrong and went back to Delhi by the next flight. One thing about Smita was that

she held no grudges.

Deepak gave her his specially prepared make-up kit that she could use when working in the'other' cinema that had no budget – nor saw the necessity – for a star's personal make-up artist. *Bheegi Palkein* must have been in production for long because when Deepak accompanied Smita to the *Ardh Satya* shoot, Nihalani refused to add him to the unit.'I don't have the budget nor does the film need that kind of make-up,' declared the cinematographer/director.

But a parallel cinema film like *Giddh* needed Deepak's expertise. He not only had to make Smita look much older but also disease-stricken. He asserts that he doesn't have one standard make-up for a film. It needs to fit the scene and story – whether it is emotional, involving tears or straight drama, if it is indoors or outdoors, and of course, day or night.

He claims that Smita became possessive about him, mentioning the time when Amitabh Bachchan was at the sets as Deepak touched up her make-up during a shoot. According to him, Smita went up to Amitabh and declared, Deepak is mine now. Deepak became close to the Patil family and Smita inaugurated the small, one-room beauty parlour his wife Sarod started in distant Dahisar. It is now spread over three floors. Smita came to depend so much on him that she would often tell him: Send me like a suhagan when I die. She said it so often, not only to Deepak but to her mother as well that they dismissed it as a quirk – a rather tiresome and troubling one.

Smita had now gained the assurance to straddle the two worlds without losing an iota of her professional and artistic commitment to either. Smita had reached what she believed was the most challenging period of her career. She was ready to take on all comers and co-stars, prove her mettle in mainstream cinema while continuing to give her passionate all to the other cinema. There was a strange osmotic process going on. It was as if the best of both kinds of cinema were permeating through the receptive membrane of Smita's sensitivity. There were fewer glitches in her mainstream performances. At times, she still brought an overdose of intensity that was too much for the conventional, safely melodramatic mode of narrative. Prime examples are disasters like *Dil-e-Nadaan* (1982) and *Qayamat*(1983).

The embarrassing excesses of her reckless signing-spree days are understandable in hindsight. Even so, the list of bad films is inexcusably long. Smita did not manage the two sides of her career

with the wisdom and discernment that Shabana displayed. (The ratio of bad commercial films is lower in Shabana's case.) Smita was mercurial, driven by an inexplicable frenzy to exhaust herself. It was greed, for experience, achievement, a desire to succeed in things alien to her temperament and sensibility. It was not primarily for money because Smita retained her egalitarian roots and ostentation of any kind was distasteful.

These were the years when she acted in the seminal *Umbartha*and *Ardh Satya*; and Kumar Shahani's cerebral *Tarang*, Ketan Mehta's dazzling *Mirch Masala* waited in the wings. It was a unique kind of artistic schizophrenia that afflicted Smita. The wonder is how she remained so sane in the middle of chaos and delivered performances that had a newer touch of maturity along with the old intensity. As Om Puri pointed out, Smita was developing a 'technique of acting' suitable for the 'different' kind of mainstream films like *Amrit* and *Thikana*. She got straight A-s in both. It was the methodical working of an intelligent mind that had sorted out the right key for each kind of storytelling.

Smita revealed a sense of commitment (misguided, according to many) to be part of a small, ideology-driven tract, *Naxalites*(1980), produced and directed by K.A. Abbas, who continued to be highly respected as a writer even though his success as a screenplay writer was behind him. As a director, he is didactic. The film is an earnest exercise to educate us politically – through the experience of a naive rebel, Mithun Chakraborty – into the birth, growth and influence of the Naxalite movement. You don't expect cinematic finesse or intellectual subtlety in what is meant to be a pamphlet for the cause Abbas believed in. Smita's role as Ajitha (based on a real-life person) is little more than a cameo in a film that spans Bengal and Telangana to propagate its progressive philosophy. Smita becomes the voice of this ideology, as she waits for her execution in jail. Her conviction converts a hardened criminal in the next cell to the cause. The simplistic film and its equally simplistic argument may not persuade us but Smita's final speech – eloquent because it is rhetoric-free – is testament to her ability to lend credibility even to propaganda with her sheer presence. She commands the screen as she walks to her death, eyes steadfast in purpose, embodying the anthem of revolution in her upright bearing. Acting in this film which obviously had no chance of success, critically and commercially, is reiteration of faith, quixotic perhaps, in cinema with a conscience.

The redoubtable B.R. Chopra banner wanted Smita's powers of passionate advocacy to make the vigilante antihero into a one-man crusader for true justice. The film is *Aaj Ki Awaaz*(1984) directed by Ravi Chopra. Written by Shabd Kumar, the script transforms a

cultured professor of literature into a self- righteous killer when he comes to the sin city, Bombay. The title pompously proclaims: 'A film addressed to the conscience of the nation.' Why the good professor – who is also a poet and singer – moves from Delhi to Bombay with his mother and sister is not clear. We guess it is to be close to the love of his life, Rajni (Smita), a public prosecutor whose father is a judge. A hero's sister exists in Hindi films to be gruesomely raped for her to commit suicide, thus fuelling the avenging brother's indiscriminate bloodlust. Raj Babbar broods and fumes, breaks up illegal clubs, pores over news of killings and rapes. Since the police can't do anything, and even if they nab the culprits, our blind legal system lets them off for lack of evidence, it doesn't take rocket science to deduce that the mild professor turns into a lethal, efficient killer by night, picking off each culprit like a sharpshooter training to join a terrorist outfit. The film invokes the definitive Bhagavad Gita sloka, '*Yada yadahi dharmasya … sambhavami yuge yuge*', as so many other exploitative films have done to justify vigilante violence. In the process of delivering his brand of justice and restoring dharma, the self-appointed crusader carries out fourteen killings in ten days. The film tries to fit the righteous rage and regressive justification into a thriller format, with a laidback but wily cop (Shafi Inamdar) on the hunt, who it turns out, condones the killings as executions.

Now the public prosecutor Rajni becomes an impassioned defence lawyer; she questions her father in the witness box and indicts him for miscarriage of justice. Smita has the stage all to herself as she surges on the tide of rhetoric the film revels in. But she has also found the way to make the clichés sound sincere, imparting the right degree of contempt and cynicism for law that goes by the rulebook. The final ace she plays is an emotional recital of his agonizing story, her voice breaking under the pain. She goes full throttle, asking if the law can give him back his mother and sister, his smile and a heart that can love, before she breaks down weeping. Smita by now knew how to deliver the high-decibel rhetoric demanded by the Chopra school.

When not playing a lawyer, or a judge as in *Dilwala* (1986), she is thrust temporarily into a kotha to suffer the slings and arrows of censorious society. The kotha is the final refuge of a wronged woman, before her dignity and honour are restored by scripts that dispense with common sense and credibility. Two Sethis, one is Ram and the other Rajesh, delight in dispatching poor Smita to the kotha to wring our hearts with pity. *Ghungroo*(1983), directed by Ram Sethi, suffers from a heavy, undigested *Pakeezah* hangover. It is made under the banner of Prakash Mehra Productions. The story inhabits a princely state set in some fuzzy time, where a Rani (Waheeda Rehman looking distinctly uncomfortable) lays down the law of succession to the

throne. There is a good nephew Shashi Kapoor most unsuitably in love with an unwilling tawaif (Smita) – virginal till he unofficially marries her – but has to sacrifice her. Smita has a platonic relationship with her rescuer who brings up her daughter who faithfully follows the family tradition of falling in love with yet another royal scion. In this senseless mishmash, you see Smita bravely emoting and dancing awkwardly on shards, like the original archetypal tawaif of Hindi cinema – Meena Kumari. Smita is endearingly earnest and gravely gracious in adversity. Was she conscious of Hindi film history? You can only speculate.

Then came *Angaaray* (1986), one more package deal with Raj Babbar for director Rajesh Sethi to cash in on their on screen chemistry that was so obvious in *Bheegi Palkein.* The screenplay and dialogue are by Salim Khan but he comes nowhere near to replicating the individuality of *Shakti*'s Roma. *Angaaray* wants to be in the better cinema category and uses masala like a timorous cook, adding pinch by hesitant pinch for a hopefully palatable broth. Instead, it becomes a lumpy mess, neither overpoweringly spicy like a typical potboiler not subtly aromatic like an art-house delicacy. Smita is Aarti Verma, daughter of a decorated army officer who was killed in action, looking for a job. The man who wants to be in her life is an honest cop called what else but Vijay (Raj Babbar), but he is too hesitant to declare his interest. Aarti is the epitome of taste, by commercial cinema standards. Yes, there is pancake and bright lipstick, but her clothes are simple churidars with ethnic dupattas and elegant saris. She takes the fancy of Ravi (Rajesh Khanna), Vijay's NRI best buddy, and the two get engaged. Aarti works for Jolly, a lecherous wolf in gabardine suit, plotting to bed her at any cost.

Smita's thespian moment after the prolonged struggle is a heavy-treaded walk and ravaged face to convey her trauma, which she does effectively. The salient point of the film is the heroine being a rape survivor, who is first rejected by the fiancé's family, and then by Vijay's mother. She is left all alone in the world, having lost her mother and her younger brother, a shippie somewhere on the high seas who comes home and gets murdered. Now comes the film's most absurd twist. A disillusioned Aarti finds refuge with the city's most famous tawaif who brims over with benignity. Aarti who is a talented singer – it's her stage performance that attracts Ravi who talks nineteen to the dozen – claims she feels more 'safe' singing and dancing in a kotha than on the stage. The film elides over what made an educated working girl accept the tawaif 's protection than seek legal recourse. Smita speaks the routine rhetoric with a surprising degree of conviction. The climactic mujra wallows in self-pity: '*Jisko bhi mara maut mara, mujhe maut ne nahin, mujhe zindagi ne mara*' and

this is followed by her dramatic breakdown.

She eliminates her rapist in spectacular fashion when her brother is killed by the villain. When Smita plays the avenger, the Kali image has to be invoked. She takes the rifle of Khan Chacha (the avuncular watchman) after he has performed namaaz, walks purposefully in a red sari and temple bells clang. Secularism needs a nod. As a colonel's daughter, her aim is deadly and she hunts down her rapist in a prolonged climax. She breaks down in shock after the adrenalin rush. Predictably, the lawyer (Ravi's father) who reviled her as a rape victim now defends her passionately in court. Except for the mujra sequence, Smita has mastered the right rhetoric for mainstream melodrama with a feminist thrust.

There is a whole subculture to Smita Patil–Raj Babbar films where she sometimes plays the discarded first wife in *Teesra Kinara* (1986) or the loyal companion who shares his exile in an elaborate witness protection programme in *Jawab* (1985). Smita is often given 'the look' – white sari with red border, mogra encircling her bun, red bindi and lipstick – to go with her soulful gaze. *Teesra Kinara* merits more attention. Written by Kamleshwar and directed by Krishnakant, the film examines the temptations that corrupt Satyajit (Raj Babbar), a journalist– poet who had espoused the cause of workers and lived in a labour colony. His first love is Shamli (Anita Raj) whose father is a publisher. But circumstances force him to marry Savitri (Smita) when he visits his village to see his cancer-stricken mother. Smita – a typical village girl with chunky silver jewellery, ulta pallu and unselfconscious friendliness – soon adjusts to being a thrifty housewife in a workers' colony, raising her two kids practically alone because the husband is so busy. The marriage heads towards complete breakdown because he now grows closer to Shamli who takes over the publishing business and makes him a lionized literary celebrity. Smita's face mirrors the pain of a wife who is kept away from the real person – the poet – in her husband, who indirectly blames her for losing his dreams in the mechanical drudgery of earning a livelihood in Bombay. The mandatory party scene of a celebratory song, where he declares his gratitude to Shamli, shows the enormous gulf between Smita's performance and the two lovers who can't declare their love openly. As the song cuts routinely from face to face, the contained pain on Smita's face gets under our resistant skin while the wooden visages of the guilty pair look tedious. Smita has less screen time here but she uses it to maximum effect.

Smita imbues Savitri with immense dignity and integrity. She may not have a formal city education but she knows her rights. Savitri confronts Satyajit when he gets home after his first triumph. Her anger is subdued and the tone, brusque. A man needs something more

than a body from a woman, he says. And Shamli gives you that, she retorts in a broken voice, revealing the pain of rejection. The argument is centred on the accusation that a woman forgets to be a companion when she becomes a wife and mother. Savitri is not meek. She taunts him for not having the courage to go and live openly with the woman who has made him famous. But remember, she warns, no other woman can give a man the sukh that a wife does. Smita is magnificent in her strength, poignant in her pain and admirable for the self-respect she holds above all else. She warns him not to humiliate her before her kids after humiliating her before the world. She hands over divorce papers, giving him the freedom to live with a woman who has played an unnamed role in his life. Smita's courage, dignity and generosity swamp everything else in the film. Her tenderness with the children is touching while her defiant gesture of not putting sindoor makes a statement. *Jab suhag chhod diya to sindoor kyon*? Kamleshwar reserves the best lines for her and she makes them count, justifying the film- maker's need to make her character central to match Smita's stature.

The other films with Raj Babbar are pathetic. She makes a cameo appearance in *Dahleez* (1986), a patriotic saga from B.R. Chopra Productions, set in the war zone with Pakistan, as a brave local who helps the Indian army. The main story is a love triangle of marital infidelity, played out by Raj Babbar, Jackie Shroff and Meenakshi Seshadri. What she suffers through in *Mera Ghar Mere Bachche* (1985), directed by Chander Vora, would test a Spartan's endurance. She is a woman with an accursed husband, who has abandoned her and her kids. She toils on a construction site, even when pregnant with her third child. There is the Madras melodrama format in operation here – her not being a widow is a bar to Geeta Mathur getting help from a man. To prevent her children from dying of hunger, she makes the ultimate sacrifice; she throws her mangalsutra at the Devi's feet and dons the widow's white. An old philanthropist (how conveniently they reserve their appearance only for Indian films) takes her and her three kids in. She is now Geeta Devi, the respected trustee of a huge charity, lives in luxury but of course but that is only the beginning of more trouble. She has to contend with Raj Babbar in a double role – her absconding husband now back from jail and her son growing up to perpetuate his father's wicked genes – and tackle sundry other problems, like a kothewali's daughter luring her son. Balwant, the husband, now starts his blackmailing game. The film is a prime example of the Madras school of social radicalism, a melodramatic way of upholding a woman's dignity – after subjecting her to harrowing cycle of suffering. In the end, the mother triumphs over the wife.

The litany of films she did in this morass of mind-numbing creative poverty is not over yet. There is *Anand Aur Anand*(1984), courtesy Dev Anand who made it a launch vehicle for his son Suneil. The story by Suraj Sanim has more twists than a corkscrew. Arun Anand (Dev Anand) is in love with his super- efficient, indispensable, wonder woman secretary, Kiran (Smita), who is so efficient and cool-headed that she even arranges the anniversary party for Arun and his wife (Rakhee), who can't conceive and is mentally fragile. Kiran, so chic in pencil skirts, tucked-in tops and neat chignons, is not so efficient that she avoids pregnancy. On a business trip, her severe skirts give way to a flirty yellow dress, hair left invitingly open and the adulterous deed is done. Kiran really loves Arun. The adulterous pair can't afford to upset the wife and the sharp businessman Arun has her marry the impotent union leader Pratap (Raj Babbar). The deal being, once the baby is born, Pratap will disappear from the scene and Arun can play surrogate dad to his real son. But babies have a way of upsetting the best laid plans of mice and canny businessmen. Pratap sees the new-born as public proof of his virility and so refuses to honour the deal, and disappears with his wife and son to a timber plantation far away. The rest of the story winds its ridiculous way to the real father and son finding each other after much huffing and puffing, and getting out of the way of drunk elephants on the rampage. No wonder even the dependable Navketan music did not help in making this hotchpotch a success or the Anand scion a star. Smita, as usual by now, delivers what she has to with commendable aplomb that stands out against the general non-acting of the rest of the cast.

Smita must have been tempted by the reputation I.V. Sasi had of making intelligently different commercial films in Malayalam, exploring an unusual psychological angle. *Anokha Rishta* (1986) is a study of Mary (Sabia), a young orphaned teenager's obsessive love for a middle-aged wealthy man Bob Brown (Rajesh Khanna) who constantly tells her he is old enough to be her father. Bob is the benefactor who has funded her school and college education. Bob had to give up the love of his life Dr Padma (Smita Patil) because of their different religions. Mary is irrationally jealous of this old bond, now settled into tepid platonic friendship and she goes to the extent of ruining her own reputation, of claiming to be pregnant, to get Bob. Sasi contrasts Padma's rather sedate mature charm against the would-be Lolita's nubile eroticism. Smita combines professional objectivity, mature understanding of Mary's budding sexuality, her warped reasoning and the empathy of an old friend for the situation Bob is caught in. Sasi is perhaps the first Indian film-maker who deals with adolescent sexuality without being coy or covering it with a veneer of romanticism.

Smita's Dr Padma is principled, will not carry out an abortion without the consent of the man concerned. She is really shocked by Mary's sudden decision to become a nun and reasons with her: Do you know what it means to cut off every relationship? Smita conveys the older woman's empathy for the obsessed teenager, not just through words and gestures of tenderness. She finally confronts her ex-love and best friend now, to finally take a decision in life, even if it is accepting a May–December relationship. Sasi evades this rather unacceptable ending with a dramatic twist. Even though hers is not a central role, Smita was content playing a character with substance.

Not every remake from a south original delivered what it promised. *Pet Pyar Aur Paap* (1984) proved that what worked in Tamil and won National Awards for the director Durai (*Pasi*, for best Tamil film) and Best Actress for Shobha in 1980, would not necessarily do so in its Hindi version. Not every film set in a slum can be a *Chakra*. Nor can Smita's feisty rag picker Janaki be a youthful Amma. Durai's whole pitch is wrong. The film is over the top, without focus, gratuitously crowded with unconnected characters and unconvincing incidents. Packing it with actors like Amjad Khan, Tanuja, Moushumi Chatterjee and Raj Babbar as the cowardly hero, among a whole lot of others, is no guarantee that this unbearably loud account of slum life can hold attention. You wonder if this is a mismatch of sensibilities, of Madras-made slice-of-reality fare unable to find the right pitch and tone with a Hindi audience. Smita does not look like an innocent teenager seduced by a married truck driver and she seems conscious of it.

As for stupidity like *Kaanch Ki Deewar* (1983), the excuse may have been acting with Sanjeev Kumar, who was an actor first, then a star. Director Yasin has much to answer for. Smita is totally out of place as a flouncy, bouncy rich girl who sneers at the country bumpkin guest, never mind that he eventually turns saviour of a family in all sorts of trouble. Even Sanjeev Kumar could not make this mess watchable. A really troubling film that I ended up watching is *Haadsa* (1983). I was not aware of its existence until a clip of Smita the seductress popped up on YouTube. Now that Smita was on my mind all the time, I had to see this dubious masterpiece that was giving a distorted picture of what Smita was on the net. Smita is all heavy breathing, come-to-bed siren who fixes the garage mechanic Akbar Khan (producer–director of this rubbish) with a scary stare as she lets her fluffy yellow towel fall around her feet. Her head is encased in a matching yellow towel, wrapped turban style.

The story is by Sagar Sarhadi. Was that the reason Smita agreed to do this sexploitation hybrid that pretends to be a psychological thriller? That she got to play a psychotic character, frustrated to be

part of her impotent rich husband's huge collection of artefacts (more like kitsch if you see the film), might have persuaded Smita. She is a disturbed child, now a disturbed woman convinced that this unprepossessing mechanic is her childhood love. She plays stalker, following him and his girlfriend, and finally takes a bullet to protect the man she obsesses about. What is sad is the effort and skill she pours into a totally unworthy project to make her character convincing, in a film where the self-obsessed hero even choreographs some medley of disco-cum-ballet to Beethoven's '*Fifth*'! Smita is not the only guilty actor to play a demeaning part here. Naseeruddin Shah's role, as a cross between a villain and a Bhojpuri-spouting comedian, has no ostensible connection with the plot as he utters mostly incomprehensible gibberish. What fools these fine actors be! Puck needs to be paraphrased.

That is the truth that strikes you after marathon sessions of watching her little-known films, some for the first time. That she could be as sincere in *Haadsa* as in *Bazaar* is incredible, hard to understand. At one level, it is professionalism, an admirable quality. At another, it is a kind of foolish bravery, of not being just content to walk through a B-grade film that does not deserve her nor even demands that level of involvement. Much before Salman Khan made the word'commitment' a catchphrase, Smita embodied commitment to her craft. She does not seem to lessen her level of intensity for a shallow family drama like *Mera Ghar Mere Bachche*. You would assume that intensity is a precious quality, to be spent carefully in measured teaspoons. Smita is profligate with her intensity, as if she had infinite, inexhaustible reservoirs of it in the depths of her being. That is why, even in such a masala vehicle as Mithun's *Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki* (1984), Smita stands up to be counted as the mother who nurtures her son to be a weapon of destruction, to avenge the wrongs done to his father. This is no non-violent Earth Mother; she incites him to complete his mission of annihilating her husband's tormentors. She reportedly had a soft corner for Mithun's unpretentiousness.

It is proved once again in *Dance Dance* (1987, released after her death). This B. Subhash atrocious absurdity, which plagiarizes a whole segment from Sidney Poitier's much-loved *Fast Forward* (1985), is watchable purely for Mithun's dance moves and agility. Smita plays Radha, his older sister who raises Ramu (Mithun) after their singer parents are presumed dead – though the raped mother survives to wreak vengeance, years later, on the unbelievably kitschy villain played by Amrish Puri who sports dangling earrings and plays the trumpet as foreplay before embarking on rape. Smita is obviously pregnant and she sportingly wears what can only be called hideously

ugly clothes to conceal her baby bump. B. Subhash's films are sure to delight connoisseurs of outrageously bad camp. He has an unfortunate fetish for unflattering display of overflowing female flesh – starting from the raped mother to heroine Mandakini who wears a short red dress with a cut out in the front to reveal midriff folds encasing her belly button. His dress designer is seemingly more decorous when it comes to Smita. Not only has she to match steps with the redoubtable Mithun and his fancy footwork, she has to do this in a spectacularly unflattering red dress festooned with a voluminous black scarf around her waist and a matching bolero on top for the signature song '*Aagaya aagaya halwawala aagaya*'. Then comes the'*Super dancer*' number where she gamely prances between Mithun and Shakti Kapoor. All are in blingy white but the ugliest dress is reserved for Smita: a kaftan-like short dress fitted at the thigh while bat-like sleeves flap about. Smita has also to bear the burden of a bad marriage to an abusive husband. It sort of becomes de rigueur for her mainstream avatar. She dies halfway through the film, after her beloved brother is on the road to success, helped by her quick thinking. Smita's voice is dubbed and comes nowhere near the familiar husky timbre.

When you see pictures of her chilling out with Deepti Naval on the rocks at Bandstand* – smartly turned out in well-fitting black jeans and white striped shirt, as she leans back slightly on the rocks, Nike-clad foot stretched out, dark hair streaming down her back – you wonder why she made compromises like *Dance Dance* with her taste.

Yes, she must have done a whole lot of these films for the money but she did give her very best to earn it. I was part of the disillusioned group of critics who felt betrayed by her choices. Seeing all these films again, alongside her best, gives you a more balanced view. Tall and erect, this latter-day Ruth stood firmly (not in tears) amid the alien corn. Smita makes you think of poetry. And her image invokes memories of paintings.

I felt this part of her career needed to be seen and assessed before returning (thankfully) to the pleasures and rewards of known territory. Smita exerted this strong, strange fascination on film-makers of all kind (and ability) to celebrate her sensuousness, unveil her inner strength, revel in the sheer magnetism of her presence and plumb the range of her talent. Some, like *Raavan* (1984), aimed high and crash landed with embarrassing results. But what inspired the effort is interesting.

Mythic resonance dives to its bathetic antithesis in the hands of a clumsy director. Johnny Bakshi was so smitten with Smita that he waited well into the 1980s, while he conjured up a so- called author-backed role for her – the wistful child–woman with innocent faith in the goodness of a man she believes is god, but who is, in fact, a

veritable Raavan. We are asked to believe in the naivety of the woebegone waif Ganga who writes letters to god, expects concrete help in return, and plays the flute when hunger gnaws her empty stomach. *Raavan* is an absurd travesty of mythology, where an uncontrollably violent Raavan is transformed into Ram after the mandatory fourteen years of vanvas while a patient Ganga waits with unshaken faith in the guise of a saffron-clad jogan. If such a silly film is mentioned at all, it is to underline the pitfalls of mangled mythology which made even Smita struggle for conviction. It is only at the end, when grey tinges her flowing loose hair and maturity mutes the girlish excess, that Smita can transcend the banalities of a script gone woefully wrong. Reinterpreting mythology is essential, it could be subversive of beliefs that have calcified into shibboleths. It needs intelligence, imagination and high degree of creativity which, alas, Bakshi is found so wanting in.

The film is absurd but there is an interesting story connected with its making. Hitendra Ghosh was practically living at the Patils' home on Forjett Street, where Vidyatai had taken this tall, thin Bengali-babu into her generous heart. Hitu, as the family called him, was unofficial bodyguard to Smita (and Manya) when needed. Johnny Bakshi called to say that the schedule of the film was on the next morning in Pune. He had booked a room for Smita at the Blue Diamond. Vidyatai insisted that Hitu should accompany Smita to Pune even though he had to be back in Bombay the next morning for work. Smita and Hitu drove through the night in a taxi and reached Pune after midnight. Hitu wanted to drive back to Bombay after dropping Smita but she would not hear of it. You must sleep for a while and then go back, she insisted. But there was no room to be had at the Blue Diamond. It was full. When they went up to Smita's room, it was not a double room. There was only a single bed. Hitu was prepared to doss down on the floor but Smita would not hear of it.

She made him sleep on the same bed as her. She was least bothered about what people would say. They were both exhausted and slept in the same bed. He got up around 4 a.m. or so and drove back to Bombay, in time to be at the sound studio for his recording. Hitu narrates this incident to show how caring Smita was. She did not brook conventions or care about possible gossip. That attitude was the essential Smita and it spoke through her work too.

Smita forayed into regional cinema with surprising openness even when the project was small. She made a Kannada film, *Anweshane* (1983). Nagabharana was in Pune to attend the film appreciation course and stayed on for a few months, working on a script with Girish Karnad. He stayed with Chinnu (Smita's co-actor in *Teevra Madhyam*) and Jayoo Patwardhan, an architect couple by training but

who went on to make two films and worked as art directors. Smita used to drop by at their house and Nagabharana narrated his script, a thriller with a black comedy twist. She was very busy at the time and it took over six months for her to agree. Theatre was a big bonding factor between them. Nagabharana (he is a National Award–winning director who has made both art and mainstream films in Kannada) was part of the theatre group Benaka which had established its credentials with an impressive repertoire of successful plays.

Revathy (Smita) is an efficient, hardworking and loving woman, happy with her life. She works as a schoolteacher. Anant Nag plays her husband. They are a devoted couple, with a normal lower middle-class life, raising their kids and looking for privacy in the communal life of a typical Vathara (small houses joined in two rows, enclosed in a compound). Not exactly a Mumbai chawl but somewhat similar. Many families live in a cluster of adjoining flats around a fairly narrow courtyard and neighbours become voyeurs of each other's lives, comings and goings, most of them avidly and some out of habit that seems contagious. Their ordinary life is disrupted when they find a dead body, of an unknown man, in their house. It then turns into a black comedy-cum-thriller, made surreal with the entry of Girish Karnad, a mysterious stranger with a limp, who is somehow connected with the dead man.

Smita is utterly credible as a working housewife, rushing through her chores and being a caring mother to her little daughters. Her scenes with the two girls are natural and convey a sense of familiar intimacy. Her body language is effortless, the way she tucks a stray strand into her messy bun, the assured movements in the kitchen; she is the housewife next door. Nagabharana remembers a scene where Anant is shaving and Smita brings him coffee. He dabs a bit of shaving cream on her face in a playful gesture. Anant Nag had a blade in his hand and inadvertently cut Smita's finger. It was a small cut but it continued to bleed for a long time and Smita had to be taken to a doctor by the worried director.

Nagabharana had plenty to worry about a film whose shooting in Mysore was a start-and-stop affair because of uncertain finances. It took a year to finish and Smita made no complaints even though she was very busy at that time. She flew down at her own expense and stayed in any kind of hotel they put her in. During breaks in the schedule, she roamed around Gandhinagar market in her regular jeans and shirt with Nagabharana's then fiancée who did the costumes for the film. The two little girls became very close to Smita and she would bring them gifts. You can see the affection on the screen. *Anweshane* was ahead of its time, in theme and style.

This magical capacity to convey so many ambivalent ambiguities

attracted directors so diametrically different in sensibility and intention that the fact never ceases to amaze. P.K. Nair was present when Smita met Aravindan for a likely Tamil/Malayalam film.'I had met her in the company of Nasreen Munni Kabir, the London-based film critic and historian, and G. Aravindan and his assistant, Sethu, at a Bombay residence near the Gateway of India. The meeting was mainly to discuss about her role in the Malayalam film *Chidambaram* which Aravindan was planning. He explained to her that the role was that of a newly married Tamil girl working in a dairy farm. Her association with flowers and nature drawing a parallel with youthful romance fascinated me. Her husband is a worker looking after the cows, taking them out for grazing and cleaning their sheds. She took avid interest and listened carefully to whatever Aravindan had to explain about nuances of the role. From the nature of discussion, one could see that she was keenly interested in acting in a Malayalam film. When they started discussing the contract details, Munni and I moved to the adjacent room.' Obviously, everything fell into place.

Aravindan, the poet–philosopher of cinema, cast Smita as the eternal female principle, a human symbol of Prakriti in magnetic opposition to Purusha, the male principle, in his magnificent essay on temptation, sin and redemption through a finely controlled colour palette in *Chidambaram* (1985). Aravindan's most intense contemplation on adulterous lust and guilt takes the painterly route from Smita's persona identified with the verdant fecundity of the hills to the grey tones of a temple town where the erstwhile lovers come face-to-face in their search for absolution. The poetic understatement of *Chidambaram* links Sivakami (Smita) to the blood red of hibiscus against the lush greenery on a remote cattle research farm nestled in the hills. The hitherto reticent manager Sankaran (Gopi, baring his soul to the caressing yet relentless camera) falls hopelessly in love with the new bride of a lowly employee. She is a Tamil girl who has come from a rather barren terrain and she is wonderstruck by the overwhelming beauty of the green hills. Shaji Karun's camera turns lover and poet as it follows an enthralled Sivakami venturing into a formally laid- out garden against the express command of her gentle husband. The images flow, as if they are illustrating a poem from the *Natyasastra*:

Gazing at
in bloom
with varying groves
forest of great enchanting odours
wanders
one bee woman

in joy[*]

Smita's Sivakami is exultant at the beauty before her, caressing the flowers with her cheeks, inhaling deeply their fragrance, all her senses awake. Smita conveys this awakened sensuousness with such graceful body language that she becomes the bee woman in joy. She is ripe for amour. Sivakami (one who desires Siva) and Sankara enact their predestined union but this human re-enactment of cosmic coupling can only cause grief. The betrayal leads to the trusting husband's suicide and no amount of repentance can expiate their guilt. Smita disappears in the latter half of the film to appear for a fleeting but unforgettable moment – as a prematurely aged woman tending devotees' shoes at the famous temple of Chidambaram. Skilful make-up and muted lighting can create grey hair and ashen pallor but only Smita could haunt you with her devastated eyes that can so eloquently express pain too deep for words. The fact that the few lines she spoke are dubbed does not matter. Smita acted with her eyes, face and her whole body with the liquid grace that Aravindan's metaphysical exploration of sin and atonement demanded.

Bengal's Utpalendu Chakravorty graduated from his usual clench-fisted tracts to a more persuasive humanism in *Debshishu* (1985), thanks to Smita's screen alchemy, which can transform an ordinary everywoman to an avenging Kali brandishing a lethal sword with utter credibility. Chakravorty delivered what was an ultimatum in effect: I can't make *Debshishu* if you are not in it. Smita not only conceded to a demand couched as a compliment but acted for free.

Chakravorty's first Hindi film was an indictment of religious charlatans who prey on peasant superstitions and ignorance. Sita and Raghubir (Sadhu Meher) are a peasant couple who have lost everything in the perennial floods that ravage Bihar. With a baby in arms and an older child, they seek refuge with Sita's older brother. But Lila, his bossy shrew of a rich wife, banishes the poor relations to the cowshed. There is a play on ideas of femininity – Lila displays her plump charms, scorning Sita's emaciated angularity. The heart of the film takes you to the fair where a tantrik lucratively exhibits a freak child with three heads and four arms as a god. Raghubir realizes that this so-called god is none other than his first-born son, a freak baby he was terrorized into parting with by the cunning tantrik, when Sita was still unconscious after childbirth. Now, the utterly impoverished Raghubir wants a share in the tantrik's earnings but he gets beaten up for blasphemy. Brooding over the injustice, he tells Sita the truth and she yearns to see her child, convinced that he will recognize her. But Raghubir reacts differently. He almost rapes Sita, demanding that she give birth to yet another freak to make them rich. She fights him like

an angry tigress, telling him that if he were man enough, he would kill the tantrik. Exhausted, she falls into uneasy sleep to be roused by a dream-like vision of herself as an avenging Kali.

By now, the role of the oppressed peasant is so familiar that Smita slips into it naturally. The physical ease with which she squats and the economy of gestures while doing household chores is so real and yet so unobtrusive. You don't hear the creaking of the Method. All you see is an actor who has penetrated the core of the character she is playing, not just getting under the skin with the practised gestures of professional training. Intuition leads Smita to translate her insights onto the screen with an unfussy, uncluttered style that has evolved with the inevitability of a flower blooming under a sunlit sky. Her bearing and demeanour suggest that a woman has more reserves of courage and fortitude, despite her hopeless situation. The last shot of her sobbing by the fence at the break of dawn, as the soundtrack echoes the train going to the city, is implicit with the paradox that is India – modernity juxtaposed with superstition. *Debshishu* created a graphic and enduring image – Smita as Kali became a ubiquitous poster. Smita doesn't allow the Kali image to descend into facile symbolism but imbues it with the utterly real fortitude of a gritty peasant whose very survival is heroic.

A markedly different troubling intensity marks the Meenakshi (Smita) of *Situm* (1984) directed by Aruna–Vikas. The story has echoes of the 1920s bestseller *Magnificent Obsession* by Lloyd C. Douglas. It is the unlikely love story of a widow and the man who is in a way responsible for her husband's death. Vikram, the actor who plays the second man in Meenakshi's life, is also the producer whose interference in the narrative messed it up.

Situm translates as the cruelty of love. The one who suffers its exquisite agony as well as the trauma of loss is the woman made vulnerable by her greater sensitivity, her ingrained guilt of learning to love and trust another again. Aruna–Vikas explore Meenakshi's sudden widowhood and her fearful, guilt-ridden acceptance of another's need and dependence on her. The three- act structure tries to pull you into the world of the mentally disturbed, where Inder Kaul (Vikram) is in a near catatonic state. The only person who can get through and reach him is Meenakshi who initially refuses to even meet him. Her reaction is outraged shock and righteous indignation which Smita gets nuance perfect. She works as a telephone operator in her husband's company, unwilling to sell the house in Pune and go back to Dharwar as the visiting aunt advises her to. Meenakshi is a woman with a conscience and when she is goaded into at least visiting the mental hospital once, she gives in. And gets sucked into the whole process of Inder's rehabilitation that only she can bring about.

The second act is the flashback to Meenakshi's happy marriage to Subhash (Naseeruddin Shah, going overboard in his Shammi Kapoor homage paying act). He is the captain and goalie of the company team, constantly fighting with the management for better facilities for the football team which reaches finals of tournaments unlike the pampered cricket team that gets knocked out in the first round. Subhash takes Meenakshi and their little son to the tournament in Bombay. In a crucial match, Inder (a star forward) kicks the ball straight at Subhash's head. Subhash collapses on the field and dies later in the hospital. A totally distraught Meenakshi screams at Inder and calls him murderer. Her happiness dies with the death of an exuberant husband who woos her uninhibitedly and almost selfishly: he insists on Meenakshi not working though she wants to, because his wife must be flower-fresh to welcome him home.

The conflict in the third act explores Smita's reactions to Inder as he recovers slowly. Instant psychoanalysis and medical explanation for Subhash's death – it was not due to the kick but an undiagnosed vascular disease – ease her acceptance to some extent but what she finds shocking is her physical response to an accidental embrace. Inder has bonded with her son and that only exacerbates her guilt. Her shocked disbelief that she can respond with pleasure to another man's touch, reluctance to accept Inder's total dependency, are feelings hardly ever explored in our films. Meenakshi's struggle against her own need to love and be loved is the heart of *Situm.* There are many flaws and much melodrama in the film but it also has genuine emotion so poignantly conveyed by Smita who invests every nuance, word and gesture with meaning.

A true actor risks her image to put her heart and soul into a venture that never gets released. When she agreed to do *Giddh*(1985), Smita was in the industry long enough to know that this unrelentingly truthful film on a subject whose existence not many want even to acknowledge, might not find takers. Yet, at the height of her career when she was so busy, she accepted T.S. Ranga's film made from the heart and gut. Ranga is from theatre and now based in Bangalore but he lived in Bombay at that time. He remembers going to Smita's house in Bandra often to get her yes to the project that was based on a four-year documentation work by a women's research group. The subject is the practice of dedicating devadasis to Goddess Yellamma. *Giddh* strips away the hypocrisy which veils the term devadasi. Ranga tries to pack in more than the narrative can bear but you can't fault his sincerity and commitment to the subject. He recalls that the film would have run to four hours if his editor Aruna Raje had not drastically pruned it.

Hanumi (Smita) is the spine that holds up the sprawl of a narrative

that wants to include everything – virgin-hungry landlords, rapacious businessmen, lustful priests, prowling pimps who feed the supply line to Bombay's notorious cages and the unfortunate jogtis and their poverty-stricken superstitious parents. Smita is an inspirational figure, not a flamboyant rebel, but the broken shell of an angry woman, whose diseased body houses an indomitable spirit. She is the archetypal whore whose body has been heir to venereal disease, shunned like a mad dog by the very men who had lusted after her in her prime. She is driven by despair and desperation to save some of the young innocents from taking the dreadful road that leads to a Bombay brothel after the landlord who has done the 'moti bandhana' ritual after she attains puberty tires of her. Her gait is ungainly, as she hobbles in pain, her face twisted in agony, but she does not cry for herself. All her concern is for Laxmi, Basappa's niece, who is coveted by two rich landlords.

Basappa (Om Puri) is a man she had loved and hoped to marry. But he was castrated by the landlord for defying him and now ekes out a livelihood in a country liquor shop, and occasional pimping to fill Hanumi's starving belly. Hanumi is obsessed with saving Laxmi, the daughter she never had and another young girl whose marriage she arranges. Hanumi doesn't mind her pariah status in the village, but exhorts them in vain to stop the dedication ritual, even at the risk of the incurring Yellamma's wrath. Her zeal is nothing less than burning. You can literally see Smita's frail body ablaze with anger, her faltering steps growing firm as she plots and fights for Laxmi's escape. You can't call this a performance. Smita is living the dreadful reality.

Ranga remembers how Smita spent the time on location, squatting in small village shops to buy Irkal saris when she got part payment of her pittance. She distributed the final payment among the light boys, says Ranga. She was totally at home, not complaining about the bare minimal facilities the production offered. They shot for over thirty-five days in Kundagol near Hubli, a place famous for hosting the Sawai Gandharva festival. She was recognized by the locals as the star who had acted with Amitabh Bachchan, but Smita was totally devoid of starry airs, according to Ranga. He remembers how her chappals broke and she sent someone to the village shop for Hawai slippers, and walked around in rubber flip-flops during the shoot. 'Her sensibilities were very strong, sensitive and childlike,' sums up a grateful director. *Giddh* did the university circuit in the US and Germany. It was finally screened on DD and had repeat shows on Sony Max.

Om Puri remembers that when they were driving back from location to Bombay, Smita insisted on stopping in Pune. They were outside Subhash Awchat's flat at 2 in the night. Smita yelled out,

Subhya! Gadhadiya! And the painter emerged half asleep and welcomed them in with hot chai. That was Smita, never missing out a chance to catch up with old friends, whatever the time.

Politics as ideological debate, as a force in shaping society, and not electoral battles and politicking, has always attracted Smita. Attribute it to her genes and upbringing. It was Marathi cinema that explored the world of power games in a rural setting in a more insistent way than others. After Jabbar Patel and his *Samna* and *Sinhasan*, came Chandrakant Joshi, an FTII graduate, to tread the familiar terrain in the little-known *Sutradhar* (1986). The banner of the production house described itself as 'a new movement organized by young lovers of the arts'. That was sufficient to attract Smita who set great store by a film where she does not play a central role. The script gives dominant roles to Nana Patekar and Girish Karnad. Karnad was an old colleague and she had not shared much screen space with Patekar (he was the smooth-tongued supplier of young girls in *Giddh*). Smita respected and admired his explosive talent.

This new production house with a commendable agenda learnt some crucial commercial lessons from the mainstream and imbibed middle cinema's earnest desire to probe the malaise that corrupts traditional power structures. The best thing about *Sutradhar* is its initial restraint: it does not make a false hero of its protagonist and also portrays the fallen tyrant as vulnerably human. Kumar (Nana Patekar) returns as the new teacher to the village which is under the yoke of Sarkar Sahib (Girish Karnad), the local landlord whom none dares to cross. Kumar remembers how Sarkar Sahib's goons beat up his father for digging a well on his own land. The fire in the young boy's eyes might look damped down in the grown Kumar but he is determined not to follow the custom of paying a respectful visit to Sarkar before he joins duty. The headmaster tries to reason with him that it is more practical to follow custom to achieve the bigger goal.
The headmaster's daughter Prerna (Smita) is back home after sixteen years, having gone away to Calcutta with her maternal uncle and then completing her education at Santiniketan. Prerna admires Kumar's quiet defiance and is drawn to her intelligence and elegant ethnic chic. It is soon wedding bells for the idealistic pair after mandatory rambles to the rocky outskirts of the village. Kumar's confrontations with Sarkar escalate and soon, he defeats him in Panchayat elections. Instead of Sarkar indulging in usual villainy to get back his power, *Sutradhar* holds a delicate balance; it softens Sarkar's tyrannical figure with self-pity and brings forth Kumar's gradual coarsening moral fibre till his conscience is compromised. Prerna watches aghast as Kumar's insidious corruption unfolds. He first condones the misdeeds of others and then becomes an amoral power seeker, beholden to the local

bigwig Nilu Phule. The director unfortunately abandons subtlety for a sledgehammer, and the moral role reversal is complete. Only Prerna is witness to this process and her disillusionment with the man she loved is complete. We see on Smita's face the palpable taste of bitter knowledge. She is the conscience keeper, even after being marginalized, and has the courage to walk out on Kumar. It is a duel of powerhouse performances – hers is the low but firm voice of reason and principles; his, the bluster of moral evasion.

Smita's roles in mainstream and off-mainstream cinema usually made her much older than she was. She had a graph laid down, from young woman to mother of grown children. Her make-up followed suit. *Amrit* (1986) was different in that Smita went over to the other extreme – a face seamed with deep wrinkles, grey hair, a waddling walk with feet apart, slight stoop – playing a prematurely aged woman who is under fifty but whose body and psyche have been scarred by suffering. Smita played the self-effacing drudge, humiliated day and night by a monster daughter-in-law (Anita Kanwar). The son is diplomatically indifferent while the bahu is aided and abetted in her cruelty by her good-for-nothing, thieving younger brother. The only joy and ray of hope in Kamala's (Smita) life is her little granddaughter. Kamala is the cook, maid, dhobi in a house named for her, Kamala Nivas, which she has foolishly made over to her son who has jelly for a spine.

Kamala escorts the tiny tot to school where she meets fellow sufferer Amritlal (Rajesh Khanna), jaunty as ever, even if he has been banished to the outhouse with dry roti, dal and an onion for sustenance. This is a man who has a sweet tooth and loves the good things of life. After the initial pretence of being the respected elders of their families wears thin, the two become good friends.

There is no end to her daily humiliation. She singlehandedly cooks for a party at the son's house and the daughter-in-law condescends to acknowledge her. Kamala stands, slightly stooped, bearing a huge platter when one of the guests genuinely appreciates the tasty food. The flush of disbelieving joy slowly suffuses her face, then comes the barbed question if she has cooked anything sweet. Instead of the usual nod, Kamala dares to say: I thought dessert is served after dinner. This unleashes the virago's wrath: how dare you teach me etiquette of serving dinner! From the uncertain joy which gives her a little confidence to this crushing insult, Smita's face is a textbook on the art and craft of conveying a range of emotions with her face, eyes and stance.

Kamala gets TB when her family is away. It is Amrit who gets her treated, working long hours as a coolie. He has the help of a kindly childless Muslim couple and a bucolic doodhwala bhaiyya who moos

sympathetically. When her saviour meets with an accident, Kamala is shocked into rushing out to see him. It is the classic rainy night, the sky split by lightning. The hitherto hapless woman who coughed, spluttered and clutched a Bhagwad Gita for support, goes into a lonely temple to deliver an impassioned monologue before the idol – de rigueur for emotional heroics ever since Amitabh Bachchan set the first phrase rolling in *Deewar*. Smita has studied and mastered mainstream histrionics by now. She makes this monologue her own, her husky voice ringing modulations with tonal variations unique to herself. She goes from low-key reiteration of her faith, accepting suffering stoically but her patience has been breached now. The crescendo leads to her ultimatum: save the angel who saved me or this idol will be just a piece of stone. Though Mohan Kumar is obviously on a crusade to speak up for the rights of the aged in his dramatically one-sided presentation of the problem since *Avatar*, he is wise enough to give near equal space to Smita instead of making it a wholly Rajesh Khanna vehicle as he did earlier. Smita rises to this challenge wonderfully well, totally in sync with the tone of the narrative. When the script demands, she makes us shed sentimental tears obeying the laws of a manipulative tearjerker.

It is not only the passionate challenge issued to god with her expressive voice but the perfect use of body language that Smita excels in. She is never out of step. According to Lalita Tamhane, Smita's favourite scene is rather surprising. At the party scene described earlier, where all the guests relish her cooking, much to her daughter-in-law's annoyance, her expression changes from gratification to shame as the virago humiliates her as someone even beneath a servant. Her face is a mirror of changing feelings. This cuts to a flashback where she is gracious hostess, looking radiantly beautiful, entertaining her husband's friends and feeding them like a veritable Annapurna as a guest remarks.

Within the graph of a blatant tearjerker with an obvious message, Smita shows the growth of her character from craven submission to final assertion of anger, when she slaps her wicked daughter-in-law for accusing her of having an affair with Amrit. A young woman can't understand the deep bond of friendship and fellowship between a man and a woman in their old age. Both of them leave the city for good.

A film like this can't end without an optimistic epilogue. Their grandchildren have married each other, castigated their own parents and set out for Pune to seek out the beloved Dadu and Dadi. Kamala now gainfully imparts her culinary skills to catering students and the ever-chirpy Amrit shepherds school kids in their bus. Except for more grey in his hair, Rajesh Khanna changes neither his manner nor gait. He actually asked the cameraman K.K. Mahajan why Smita insisted on

looking so old. He wanted to look spry and handsome even as an old man. Smita's commitment to look the character without vanity was something alien to him. This lack of vanity does not surprise those close to her. Anita remembers that Smita was to come to a function of Stri Balashakti, the organization for women and children, run by their mother. She rushed there straight, in her *Amrit* avatar, grey hair and wrinkles, not bothering to get back into her real skin for a public occasion.

Lalita remembers being on the set during the shoot. Smita asked her about her favourite scene. When Lalita chose the one long take of Smita's changing expressions, Smita was really happy. She asked Lalita to bring Vidyatai to the preview, something Smita's mother rarely did. Vidyatai sobbed through the preview, something she had done years ago when she watched the Meena Kumari starrer *Sharda*. Smita had learnt the lesson of winning family audiences over to her side – essential to succeed in Bollywood.

Smita was essential when a director needed to invoke gravitas. Another director who used her iconic presence to confer artistic and intellectual validity was J.P. Dutta in *Ghulami* (1983). This vaulting epic, drawing on film references going all the way to *Mother India*, is commercial cinema's most ambitious effort to unravel the iniquities of the caste system in the feudal ethos of Rajasthan. The rebellion against the depredations of the local Thakur is led by Ranjit, a native son of the soil, a peasant who comes back after serving in the army. There are many layers to this action-packed engaging drama. Smita plays Sumitra Devi, the educated daughter of the Thakur, who was a childhood friend of Ranjit and shared a love of books with him. She is still drawn by an unspoken bond to the stalwart rebel (Dharmendra in one of his best performances). There is sympathy and understanding implicit in her low-key interaction with him. The relationship with her IPS husband (Naseeruddin Shah) is rather formal and he senses that Sumitra's happiness when he mentions being posted in her home town has something more to it. She meets Reena Roy, the woman in her childhood friend's life.

Sumitra is compassionate to Reena and loving with her baby, picking it up to shussh the crying infant. She can see through Reena's barbs and feel the pain of the other woman. Her mediatory role in trying to bridge the vast gulf that separates her husband and the lawbreaker is an exercise in futility, but she keeps trying. Sumitra's sympathies are with her class enemies and she has to live with this internal conflict. She brings out these complexities in the few scenes she has. Smita limns her cameo with intelligence and sadness at the inevitability of the conflict that pits her class interests against the downtrodden. Her dilemma is more acute because her husband is the

SP expressly sent to nab the class enemy. Strange but true, the few scenes with Smita leave a more lasting impression than those detailing the brief happiness and prolonged suffering heaped on the ostensible heroine Reena Roy. A true star is one who shines bright even in a sky crowded with many contending mainstream stars and starlets.

Posthumous films come edged with a piercing sort of poignancy. It makes memory sharper and paradoxically, mellower. Two such films are deeply affecting. *Thikana* (1987) has a hasty dedication to Smita Patil in the titles. Actually, it is Smita and Rohini Hattangadi who make this routine thriller memorable in a very disturbing way. Mahesh Bhatt agrees. He excels in depicting a harrowing, frustrating relationship between a bitter mother (Rohini Hattangadi) and her eldest child, Shashi (Smita), a working woman who supports a dysfunctional middle- class family. A crime thriller with the spurious angle of exposing a politician's misdeeds has an unusual hero. Ravi (Anil Kapoor) is an alcoholic, briefless lawyer who will not practise law because as a self-indulgent idealist, he finds it corrupt to the core.

Who keeps him wallowing in the luxury of idealism is his older sister Shashi who chooses not to marry the cop who loves her (Suresh Oberoi) because it will hurt her dear brother's self-esteem. She would rather abort yet another pregnancy. It is not the tepid meandering thriller that holds our interest but the tension-filled, needle-sharp relationship Shashi shares with her suspicious mother who watches her like a hawk. Mahesh Bhatt, in his wonted style, strips off the hypocrisy of happy families and lays bare the corrosive suspicion of female sexuality when it is not fettered within the safe confines of marriage. The fights between mother and daughter are loaded with viscerally wounding words and descend to physical violence. In one scene, Shashi grabs her mother's throat, as anger and hurt spiral out of control. Such brutal honesty in middle-class homes is almost non-existent in our cinema. Smita and Rohini portray this ugliness and pain with searing authenticity. Bhatt talks of his fondness for Maharashtrian women, their softness and strength, a legacy of growing up in Shivaji Park. The mother's hard- headed pragmatism – Rohini Hattangadi surprises you with her anger, suspicion and understandable anxiety – is matched by Smita's fraught emotional state, living a stealthy double life to protect her brother's self-esteem. Being the nurturing older sister demands so much more of a woman, especially one who so idealizes her confused, if principled brother, that she is the one who pays the ultimate price. The embittered mother– daughter relationship in a middle-class context is a louder version of a similar problem in Mrinal Sen's subtle, introspective *Ek Din Pratidin.* Smita and Rohini prove that acting is a two-way process, and when two fine actors engage in it, even a mediocre melodrama

gains the cutting edge of emotional truth.

Smita, who was pregnant during the shooting, had to be careful, more so during the scenes where her angry, overwrought mother pulls and shoves her roughly. You wonder if playing such an emotionally stressful role was good for her well-being.

The last film in Smita's legacy leaves a bitter-sweet taste. *Waaris* (1987), a gritty if convoluted story based on Sohan Singh Hans's Punjabi novel *Kaare Haathi*, celebrates a visceral, possessive lust for land and depicts the lengths to which a woman will go to retain those golden acres of wheat within the family. Director Ravindra Peepat delineates in considerable, if bewildering detail, the fratricidal hatreds that lust for land breeds and he has a readymade earth mother in Smita for the central role of Paro. Paro's emotional gamut runs a dizzying arc – from hardworking daughter to coquettish maiden at a mela, to the new bride widowed before the wedding night, to a determined bahu who gets her widowed fifty-year-old father-in-law married to her own younger sister so that a legitimate heir is produced to claim the land.

Smita subsumes her sensuousness under her matriarchal instincts. She brings a certain grace to the ritual of everyday chores – churning butter, pounding chillies or making seviyan – and steely-eyed determination when she plots to thwart her late husband's cousins from grabbing the ancestral land. These cousins have murdered her husband and gone scot-free. They molest and mock her. Her father-in-law's older brother, who has been disinherited, taunts Paro: sleep with one of my sons and see if you can produce an heir.

Paro unleashes her fury upon them and from this despairing rage is born her resolve to anyhow produce an heir to these sprawling acres. She can be ruthlessly unsentimental about her younger, much-indulged sister's love for a village youth and command the wavering father-in-law into wedding and bedding a girl he had hitherto called beti. Conveniently, it is revealed the sister has been adopted and this solves two problems. One, the father-in-law is not marrying his bahu's sister; second, the sister wants to prove her loyalty to the adoptive family. The film doesn't question the morality of Paro's actions nor does Paro have any such qualms. A singular passion consumes Paro, and Smita concentrates her energy in forging herself into a laser-powered lethal weapon that can safeguard the property of a family she has married into. It is patriarchy all the way, and a strong woman like Paro internalizes its mores and assumptions, without questioning its rights and wrongs. It needs the overpowering presence of Smita to make this plausible to the audience. Acting is the art of making the morally murky world understandable, even acceptable.

Waaris almost smells of bloodlust. It reminds us of what we have

lost. Smita died, giving birth to her waaris before she could start dubbing for a film into which she poured her heart and soul. Rekha, an accomplished mimic, filled in more than adequately. But we *know* the difference. Smita's voice has a rawness, a throbbing vibrancy under emotional stress. The vibrancy has been stilled. Forever.

*Translated from the Hindi interview for *Murtimant Asmita,* Lalita Tamhane's audio-visual stage show in memory of Smita.
*This photograph is posted on Deepti Naval's website
*From *Sanskrit Love Poetry*, translated by W.S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson, Columbia University Press

7

The Woman Behind the Image

I have a confession to make. Though I was writing on Indian cinema, I never met Smita when she was alive. I was content to watch her incredible performances and wrote often about her films in my column 'Images of Women' for *Eves' Weekly*, as well as regular reviews for other publications. It was a paradox – the mystique of her screen image had an almost dazzling aura and yet, there was the strange, subliminal conviction of a very real, very complex woman who inhabited these roles to such persuasive perfection. Somewhere in the mind, the image and the screen persona fused – the magic of cinema at work – and I felt no urge or need to test the magic, to try and interview her. It was also part of my self-imposed discipline as a freelance critic to not do star interviews. Was I scared of an illusion dissolving at the touch of reality? This is a question I ask myself, with futile regret. Of course, I was aware of her off-screen life as anyone interested in cinema would be.

I, like most others, was struck by her presence on TV. I watched the Marathi news often, though it is not a language I am conversant with, just to see her. And hear that unforgettable voice. The ring of sincerity and conviction, which Smita brought to the most banal of officially sanctioned news, marked out a rookie newsreader as someone special. Bhawana Somaaya, chronicler of the industry as reporter and then editor of *Screen*among other publications, revealed an interesting bit of information. Vinod Khanna was one of the many Mumbaikars who rushed home, if they could, to tune in to Marathi news, just to watch Smita. The news those days did not have much

visual content, except for ministerial pronouncements and official functions. Smita made news sexy, with her husky voice, magnetic eyes under long tapering eyebrows (their unplucked naturalness framed an arresting face that recalled Ajanta frescos to my mind) above which was a trademark large round bindi, and her traditional saris. Her sophistication breathed the air of classic simplicity. It hinted at the fragrance released by parched earth under the first rain. And then, she was in Shyam Benegal's films. History was made. To see an icon being created before your eyes is an unforgettable experience.

How do you separate the image from the person? Do the two meld into each other at some deep, subterranean level? We always felt that the essential Smita is an amalgam of what we have responded to in cinema, and learned to treasure, appreciate and love. This is of course a romantic idea we harbour in some corner of the heart and most of the time, we do know that is what it is: a romantic idea of the person we know from long hours spent in the dark of cinema halls, in the concentrated absorption with which we watch a DVD of her film, rewinding at will to watch an unforgettable scene again, hear that mesmerizing voice speak from the heart. Yet there is a hunger to know more, not just the details of her life, of what she did when, but to grasp the Smitaness of Smita. The best art is what it conceals. Because there is an unknowable quality in a human being that remains elusively out of reach, even as we decode the outward signals, gather impressions from those who knew her, pore over old interviews, sigh over what we cannot ever know now. Cherish what we know and respect the privacy of what ought to remain private now that she is not here to speak for herself. There is an enigmatic transparency to her life and personality. It has intrigued fans and film historians. Transparency is not just pellucid clarity of intent, action and feeling. It can mean the courage to live with contradictions. There is no urgency to paper over contrary impulses with facile reconciliations.

It is easy enough to deconstruct a screen image and read the subtext, of intended and unintended meanings. It is a different matter altogether to construct the person from insights, memories, anecdotes gleaned from a spectrum of people whose life Smita touched – intensely, joyfully, painfully, poignantly or even briefly in passing. Fragments that contradict and complement each other, memories shared willingly or having to be drawn out, encounters narrated from the hindsight of political correctness … it is a journey of discovery.

So, what was Smita like as a person? Some words recur with metronomic regularity. Down to earth, warm, sincere, rooted, grounded, compassionate, sensitive, caring, carefree – myriad adjectives, with their infinite connotations, adding up to a woman with high emotional intelligence. Then there are contrary pairs:

possessive and generous, demanding and giving, impulsive and pragmatic, ambitious and unworldly, fun loving and moody. Now, these contrarian combinations are what intrigue us. Mohan Agashe says:'I describe her as an illusion. She was not intelligent or intellectual but sensitive. Intense. And there were people all over the world who cared for her. Old John Warrington [the late British film critic, regular at our film festivals] was so smitten. From Warrington to a Polish actor, a Swedish director, they were all in love with her. She was so intense, so charming. One would be scared that she'd go mad when she started laughing.' So speaks the psychiatrist, friend from her teen years and co- star of many films.

Anita's favourite term for her sister is: free bird. A free spirit. This free-spirited attitude was innate to her right from childhood to the time she became an actor and then a star. Smita wanted to be at the wheel, drive all the time. She'd tell the driver, *tum peechhe baitho*. She was also very impatient. If somebody misbehaved on the road, did not follow the rules, she'd give them the choicest gaalis. Anita who characterizes herself as being an obedient child marvels at how Smita had an inborn sense of adventure. Smita had this great craving to drive a jhonga – the army jeep. She had a friend, Dilshad (she was one of the ADs on Attenborough's *Gandhi*), who was just as crazy.'I don't know how the hell they got hold of a jhonga. They drove all the way from Delhi to Bombay in those days! It was scary. I told Smi: think of your face. What'll happen to your career if anything happens to your face! She didn't give a damn. What'll happen, she'd say without a care. Chambal was not safe at that time. Her only condition was: Don't tell Maa. And my condition was, she had to call every night. It had to be on a landline of course. It did not strike her even once what'd happen to her career if anything went wrong. Until she reached Bombay, my heart was in my mouth.' Anita adds: The girls wore turbans, pants and shirts, as if that was protection enough.

Smita's first car was a small Fiat, a two-seater according to Hitendra Ghosh. She dragged him home and wanted him to ride with her when she drove. He was a bit scared, he confesses. He told her, 'You are driving in Tardeo and what if you go and dash into something?' But drive with her he had to. Friends couldn't be let off so easily. This desire to drive extended to bikes too. Smita graduated from bicycle to scooter in Pune, as most Pune girls did. She wanted to drive a big motorbike. And she pestered Hitu to somehow help her do this. He had become part of the family, and when they were staying on Forjett Street, their top-floor flat had a room to the side as soon as you entered. Smita's father was not a minister anymore and the Patils were often out of Bombay, on their social work. Though Hitu had PG digs nearby in Tardeo, it was an unwritten rule that he would come

and stay at the Patil house in the parents' absence. Smita badgered Hitu to get her to ride a big bike. He realized that Aladin, a sound engineer, lived in the same building as Smita. Aladin had two sons and they had a bike. Hitu approached them, and asked if they could teach Smita. They readily agreed and taught Smita in a small Tardeo lane. Later, on some other film unit, a lot of bikes were brought for the shoot. Smita asked the stuntman to teach her to ride a bike properly. And he obliged. Ever since, she rode a bike whenever she could. It is something Shabana speaks of with awe: when they were together shooting for *Mandi*, Shabana learnt that the tomboy who played volleyball with the boys could also ride a bike. Difficult to imagine the traditional Smita we see in handloom saris as a biker girl.

Her very dear friend Aruna Raje Patil reveals that Smita was 'almost addicted to driving fast. During the shooting of *Situm* in Pune, she just got into the unit car. With a *chala javya* (let's go), she raced to the hotel where they were staying. There was no parking place, it was full of scooties and bikes. Very nonchalantly, she just shifted them and parked the car.' We don't find Smita at the wheel in many films, except for *Haadsa*. As the psychotic woman obsessed with the hero, she had a chance to drive some fancy wheels and at great speed. Maybe that was one of the reasons for doing this B-grader! Smita often summoned Rauf Ahmed on an impulse to ride with her. She would tell him, leave your car behind and come with me. She wanted to talk to him, even seek advice on relationships she got into. Rauf remembers telling her gently and firmly that he was no one to either validate her involvement or tell her what to do. She would instantly sulk but get over it with a merry laugh. She sought him out as a friend, not a journalist and editor who could help her career. That kind of manipulation was simply not Smita.

She did not seek the press to publicize her commitment to work for the good of society. She screened *Umbartha* to raise funds for the Women's Centre, so that they could buy a two- room place in Kalina. A politician's daughter who did campaign for him in his constituency but was not interested in electoral politics at all. Helping the marginalized was what she believed in. Deepak Sawant often worried that Smita took on unnecessary tension upon herself. She would brood over incidents of abused women, stories she heard as part of her work with women's groups. Smita would give financial help to individual cases but she fretted that she could not do more.'You can only do as much as you can. Can't help or change the whole world' was the advice a pragmatic Deepak offered to the troubled star. Smita was not India's Hanoi Jane who sent the Pentagon into apoplexy. Nor was she the elegant Vanessa, of the theatre royalty Redgraves, whose radical liberalism pierced Conservative armour even more sharply because

they saw it as apostasy from one of their own. Feminism in India was concerned with getting women an equal wage, and protection from domestic violence and police brutality in concrete, countable ways. This was something close to Smita's heart because her mother and sister Anita – along with other role model figures – were active in this field. Yet, she had to face the scepticism of orthodox feminism's doubting devis. Sonal Shukla who was very active then (she now runs Vacha, a resource centre for schoolgirls) confesses that a film star's motives were usually suspect because it could be a publicity gambit. She admits Smita did win them over with her sincerity and transparent commitment to the cause. Flavia Agnes, lawyer and founder of Majlis, describes how closely Smita followed the Mathura rape case and the work done by feminists to change the law applicable to custodial rape. It is no surprise that Smita was invited by the Indian government to participate in an International Women's Conference organized by the UN as part of the Women's Decade in 1985.

Actually, Smita is a pioneer of film-star involvement in social work at the height of her career. Nargis Dutt's work for the Spastic Society came post-retirement from films. She accompanied her husband Sunil Dutt and his Ajanta Arts troupe when they went to border areas and defence establishments to entertain soldiers. It was Bollywood taking up the established Hollywood tradition that began with the Second World War. Otherwise, we saw film stars rallying for funds to help flood victims or other natural disasters. The earliest example was Lata Mangeshkar singing '*Aye mere watan ke logo*' in the aftermath of the 1962 war with China to raise funds and lift the national morale. But working in her individual capacity to follow the family tradition of social work without expecting political returns is unparalleled and commendable. This is the core of truth that lies at the heart of who Smita was. And is. Arun Khopkar sums it up succinctly: 'She was more of the earth than the mind. She was also more of the heart than of the mind.'

What Om Puri says is illuminating in more ways than one.'I believe that to be a good actor, if you are a good human being, it enhances your characterization.' Everyone I have spoken with talks of how simple, approachable and non-film star like she was and remained. Remained is the crucial word. Celebrity changes people. But by all accounts, Smita remained immune to the blandishments and insidiously corrupting effect of fame. Fame is fame, whether it is in your face like that of a Bollywood star, even starlet, or the more artistically respectable status of an art cinema icon. Smita remained refreshingly down to earth. Jhelum remarks that Smita learnt to handle fame with casual aplomb. To quote Om Puri again: 'On location, she was just like one of us. She had an understanding of love,

a lot of sincerity and warmth came through in her performances. She got along with everyone. She was very brash in a positive kind of way.'

This brashness came through at unexpected times. Anita talks of an incident in Pune when Smita went to drop off a visiting cousin at the ST (State Transport) bus station. She was standing with Neelu, her cousin, in the queue, waiting for the interminable line to move so that passengers could board their bus. A man broke the queue and Smita let fly. Feisty and angry, she fought with him, let loose her vocabulary of abuse, unmindful of people around who recognized her. What's more, she came back home and narrated the whole to Anita with gloating satisfaction over a public fight.

Arun Khopkar says ruminatively: 'The stardom didn't weigh heavy on her shoulders. She was very down to earth. Once you became a friend and you kept the trust, there was no change in the relationship. She had become a kind of role model for many women in Maharashtra. Here was a woman with no airs, whom you could directly approach. She was so direct, she had no … contamination. [After a long thoughtful pause to find the right word.] If you were truthful, she was equally truthful. Before I went to Paris [he was on a Homi Bhabha fellowship to study cinema], I called her. She was having a festival there. She was not in and I left a message saying this is her mother's number and you can check. She called at 1.30 and talked for over an hour. We were back at the same point when we had worked together the first time.'

Yes, some old friends and colleagues drifted away once Smita got busy with her frenetic pace of shooting. But their memories are warm and come up in a flurry of recollections once memory is nudged. Like it happened with Hitendra Ghosh who got busy with his own career as a much-in-demand sound recordist and Smita was caught in the whirlpool of commercial films. There was also a slight distancing when he married Vanita, a journalist. Vanita, as editor of *Stardust*, once wrote a story (about Smita and Raj Babbar) that upset Smita. Her involvement and marriage to Raj Babbar kept many old friends at arm's length. Rauf Ahmed recalls feeling awkward when he went to her Bandra flat to drop off something and was met by a forbidding Raj Babbar who discouraged him from lingering. That in no way diminished their affection and regard for a friend who meant so much. Jhelum and Aruna were pillars of strength during Smita's troubled days of her mother's strong disapproval. Her real friends, old and new, personal and from the media, might not have approved but stood by her. The consensus was (whatever their reservations) that Smita was an adult and you had to respect her choice, and be there for her when she needed you. Aruna and Smita were sisters in suffering; Vikas (the

editor– director Aruna worked with as a team) was divorcing her even as their young daughter was in the terminal stage of cancer. Smita was like a rock. She dropped by to play with and keep young Gargi company whenever she found time between shoots. Smita had a way with children, cheering them up with her unstinted affection. Aruna says her daughter loved Smita Masi's company and longed for her visits.

You could call it the sisterhood of the Marathi mulgis. Smita, Jhelum and Aruna. Smita and Aruna share a birthday. Jhelum remembers going to Smita's house with a decorative wall ornament. These two childhood friends were content to just meet, it did not really matter if they gave each other birthday presents. Aruna also came by a little later and Smita realized she had no present ready for her birthday-mate. Smita asked Jhelum, would she mind if she gave the gift meant for her to Aruna. It's yours to do as you wish was Jhelum's nonchalant reply. Jhelum recalls that Smita had not even opened the present. She just gave it to Aruna. This was not recycling gifts in a calculating way – as it is done with replicated wedding gifts – but to keep the birthday spirit going. There was so much sharing and informality that the comfort level they enjoyed was something they took for granted.

Caring and instinctively warm – these are the qualities everyone talks about, be it friends, journalists or of course family. Om Puri's testimony ought to pass the sceptic's test: 'She was not class-conscious, whether with a spot boy or a fellow actor. I have never seen her bullying anybody or being demanding.' He goes on to add: 'She was very fond of me. She was very concerned that I didn't have a house when *Ardh Satya*was released. I used to go to her house. She made me meet her mother and told her: "Maa, you know Vasantrao Patil, please get him a small flat." So Maa took me to Vasantdada, to Varsha, the chief minister's official home. When we went there, there was a magazine on the table. It had me on the cover. His staff must have told him and prepared him for the meeting. Vasantdada asked me: How long have you been in Maharashtra? I said: Sir, ten years. He told me that earlier it took ten years but now fifteen to get a flat. He hinted to Smita's mother that if there could be a domicile certificate, it would have to be fake. I said I don't want to. I was in drama school in Delhi, my address was different. Here I had to prove that I was in Maharashtra. At some point in life something comes up and there will be a scandal. So I said: I will wait. I will buy a house when I can afford to. But Smita was very, very kind and felt bad for me.'

Smita showed her caring in concrete ways. Hitu had herpes. Smita straightaway took him to a homeopath. He must have treated her too, assumes Hitu.'I was uncomfortable with all the detailed questions

homeopaths ask. Why is he asking me all these private things? I grumbled to Smita. She told me to just answer the doctor and that was that.' Later, the herpes started bleeding and Hitu called her. She immediately came to his PG room and put cold compresses on his head to ease his splitting headache. It was night but that did not matter to Smita. Caring for a friend who needed her was expected. Smita was noted for extending this sort of unexpected care to people who were not personally close to her.

Piroj Wadia appreciates how courteous Smita was to her even if they had not met for a long time. Their first interaction was a photo shoot Smita did for *Cine Blitz*. Piroj points out Smita's ironical sense of humour. When she saw political workers walking out of the house, she remarked, 'That's my father's retinue,' uncaring that she was speaking to a journalist. Once, on a set, she saw Piroj using an inhaler. She was all immediate concern: 'You have an asthma problem. You shouldn't be sitting here.' She saw to it that Piroj was seated far from the smoky atmosphere.

Smita loved the sea – the antidote to Bombay's pollution and smoke-filled studios – and dreamt of a house overlooking the sea. The stormy sea lashed by monsoon winds and spray hitting your face – how she looked forward to that! The tragedy is that she died before the house was completed. Vidyatai says Smita searched for seven years for the right flat by the sea. The home Smita built with such care bears her imprint in many ways even now. Rock Cliff faces the sea at an unusual angle. You enter a large lobby that doubles up as a dining room cum informal office. One step down and the living room invites you to lounge informally on its low wooden settees and a couple of chairs. The cushions on the settees are neutral earth colours or ethnic block prints – exactly what Smita wanted. Shivajirao says he had good-naturedly grumbled and thought a sofa would be more comfortable. But Smita would have no sofas in her dream house. Vidyatai had remarked the first time I met her years ago: Smita wanted, literally, to be close to the ground. Subhash Awchat remembers another instance of Smita's instant make-over of the flat she was living in. That was Vasant, again in Bandra. She was in a panic. An important producer (could be B.R. Chopra, guesses the painter) was to come home and it was barely furnished. She went on a shopping spree at Chimanlal's in Colaba – the home of ethnic décor – and came back with chattais, floor cushions and lamps. It was the acme of elegant simplicity.

This simplicity extended to her food preference too. By necessity (caused by a delicate digestion) and choice, Smita was a vegetarian, remember. Jabbar had to reassure her while on the flight to Moscow that he had something in his suitcase to make insipid Russian food

palatable. They were part of a huge Indian delegation. Jabbar's grandmother had thoughtfully packed an assorted mix of Maharashtrian dry chutney powders to spice up Russian food, notorious for its blandness. In the Moscow hotel, Jabbar would bring his chutney powder to the breakfast buffet and hide it from other Indians. It was meant for Smita and him. But the aroma of Indian chutney is so strong that it wafted to the next table where the redoubtable Amita Malik smelt it at once. Not only Amita Malik but Raj Kapoor too smelt the garlic-redolent chutney and loudly claimed his share. Trips to Russia were doomed to be gastronomic disappointments.

Another huge Indian film contingent was feted at Tashkent. Food was spicier than Moscow fare but still fell short of satisfying Indian taste buds. Rinki Bhattacharya was part of the delegation with her husband Basu, and once again, it was led by Raj Kapoor. Rinki became friends with Smita on this trip. Smita and Varsha Bhosle (journalist daughter of Asha Bhosle) were inseparable. Rinki was amused at how the two girls could down their vodka shots, shot after shot, with not much visible effect. The three of them went out for long walks, discovering Tashkent on their own. Everything was fine, except that Smita was homesick for simple dal and rice – something the hotel did not provide, and there were no Indian restaurants in Tashkent those days. Rinki was resourceful. She invited herself and her two friends for a simple meal to the home of a young Indian couple (Rinki thinks they were from Orissa) who worked at the consulate. Rinki, a gourmet cook herself, confesses the meal was pretty much awful – lumpy dal and sticky rice but Smita got some sustenance. If only Smita could make her famous toast! Om Puri relishes Smita's toast with a nostalgic sigh.'I remember her toast. She'd make it differently. She would first put butter and then pop it into the toaster. It was like the way we would make it on a tava. It tasted different. I used to love her toast. She had problems with digestion, had a delicate stomach but she never threw tantrums. I never remember her complaining. She would manage with whatever there was. Even on location.'

Smita was travelling the world at a time vegetarianism had not become mainstream, even in the big cities. Anita remembers the time the two of them were in Paris together and lived in a flat. 'Smi basically liked varan bhat, Brahminical Puneri food. She'd be eating baguettes. Our hosts used to take us out and there'd be all this non-veg food. One day they took us to some Asian place – not Indian – and Smi saw rice. And her face went, Ooh! She put her feet up and happily tucked into rice. She didn't worry about her image.'

Once again in the early 1980s, Smita was alone in Paris. It was Dileep Padgaonkar, former editor of *Times of India*, who helped her

explore the Left Bank since he knew the city well. He was then working for UNESCO. More than his wife Latika, it was Dileep who walked around Paris with Smita, whose leg was in plaster because she had fallen and hurt it. 'But nothing could curb her enthusiasm. She was very curious and lively,' says Dileep. They went to the café frequented by Jean Paul Sartre. 'It was a café with a highfalutin reputation for being the gathering place of artists. Modigliani was a frequent visitor and a huge portrait of the painter was on the first floor. On the second floor lived the widow of Romain Roland who I knew well,' says Smita's guide who escorted her to the cultural landmarks of the city. Dileep recalls he had to act as interpreter for Smita and her French friends who had opened a bottle of wine for her at the café. She did not speak French and they spoke very little English. They had heard and read about her much before the Retro in Paris, he says. These were people who were interested in Indian cinema. And of course, with 'the ghat connection, we spoke to each other in Marathi,' he says. He knew her parents well and Manya too. What Dileep remembers is her enthusiasm and curiosity about the culture of the city she was visiting.

This curiosity about the world is what drove Smita, be it travel, photography, books and people. Her interest was focused on cinema by this time but not to the exclusion of other things. Arun Khopkar calls her a curious reader. Ravi Deshpande attributes her early eclectic reading to her father's influence. Ketan Mehta sums her up with brevity: 'She was very lively. With her sense of humour, wit, she brought everyone alive. She managed to do both, mainstream and parallel, which is rare. She kept in touch with her old friends even when she was a mainstream star. She was well-read in Marathi literature, she was rooted and connected.' Om Puri values Smita's spontaneity. 'I remember a film festival in Delhi. We were sitting in Shyam's room. This was after *Ardh Satya*. There were other people in the room. She suddenly grabbed my arm and said: *Chalo zara ghoom ke ate hain*. Shyam said: Where are you going at 10 in the night! She said: No, get the car. Take me to NSD. We went there, sat in the open-air theatre and chatted for some time. So this is where you guys did your theatre, she said. Then we came back. She was impulsive that way. I was thrilled that Smita Patil picked me to go for a drive.' Om confesses he was very shy those days.

As for films, Hitu recalls his days at FTII when Smita would visit him there. She did not speak of Hollywood and its stars. She was more interested in famous directors. She pestered him to arrange for a screening of Ritwik Ghatak's classic, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Ghatak was on the faculty then. One night, drunk as he usually was, Ghatak stumbled upon Hitu at the sound studio and advised him to take it all

apart and reassemble if he wanted to learn about sound. Hitu knew his opportunity when he saw one. He asked Ghatak if they could watch *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to learn about sound. And presto, the screening was on and Smita saw the classic. She did not discuss cinema, either in the abstract or the films she was doing. She was living it. Deepti Naval, who had met Smita first in New York which was her home then, simply says, 'We talked about life whenever Smita dropped by.' What they had in common, according to Deepti, was their non-filmi background and interest in so many things other than films. Smita was shooting for *Amrit* and the location was close to Deepti's Versova flat – it spells elegant and personalized simplicity. Smita would sigh and absorb the non- filmi ambience gratefully because her way of living was getting Bollywoodized with Raj Babbar's entry into her life.

Stars are generally wary of journalists and there are very few genuine friendships between stars and the hack brigade. Lalita Tamhane's friendship with Smita is indeed something unusual. Lalita came to interview Smita for her college magazine, a career in journalism far from her mind. She was a science student and came from a family of academics. After the first interview, which was not at all along conventional lines, Smita asked Lalita as she was leaving: So when do we meet again? Taken aback, Lalita sort of hemmed and hawed, and met Smita after her stage performance of *Chinnh* in Thane. And they kept meeting, on the sets or at Smita's home. From semi-professional to personal was swift progress and Lalita was drawn into the Patil family circle. Lalita claims that Smita was possessive. If Lalita left to meet another actor, she turned sulky. It was not star tantrums or narcissism but a need to have a person she liked all to herself, at least for that particular span of time. She also had a genuine curiosity about people and would ask Lalita about the other stars she met. One star Lalita admired and met frequently was Nutan. She spoke to both about each other and became a tangible link between two of our finest actors who did not meet but formed a bridge of mutual admiration.

Another critic who wrote for Marathi papers and magazines is Rekha Deshpande, and she grew close to Smita as well. Rekha saw the conflict in Smita and her need for her mother's approval. She went to Panhala to cover the shoot of *Sutradhar* and Smita was happy to see a friendly face and greeted her with a hug. The Hindi press was particularly hostile and damned Smita as a home-breaker. Perhaps the Marathi press was comparatively more understanding. Rekha Deshpande's book *Smita Smruti*elaborates on Smita's frankness. Smita once said: 'I had planned to speak very carefully. But I couldn't manage it.' Rekha replied, 'We like you because you are not diplomatic.' To which came Smita's instant riposte: 'You mean I am

stupid.' She could take a joke against herself. Whenever she was in a small town or village, Smita scoured the place for traditional saris. She dragged Rekha all over the place, into homes since there were no showrooms. She had absolutely no awkwardness with the villagers and played with the children – it seems her standard response to rural locations. She also showed off the chunky silver jewellery she bought but warned, 'Don't ask me what I paid for it.' A case of buyer's remorse and middle-class thrift speaking up.

People who did not know Smita well found her reticent and shy. If she was in the company of older and more established people in the arts, the bindaas Smita retreated into a quiet observer, absorbing the swirling conversation around her. Chitra Palekar, prominent in experimental theatre, recalls a subdued Smita who was respectful of older people 'like a good middle- class Maharashtrian girl'. Chitra was often invited to theatre rehearsals by her buddies to watch and give her frank opinion on their performance. Chitra went to the rehearsal of *Chinnh* at the invitation of Dilip Kulkarni, an actor-friend. She saw that Smita was at ease on the stage, not disconcerted by an unexpected visitor known for her plain-speaking, and met her respectfully afterwards. Chitra confesses that she was on the periphery of Smita's circle. She still cannot get over Smita's reaction after the special preview of *Bhumika* for the cast and crew (Chitra was married to Amol Palekar then). Smita stood aside, crestfallen, shrinking into herself, saying,'I was so bad in the film.' And then she goes on to win a National Award for the same role! But this is no case of false, put-on modesty, according to Anita. Smita did feel that she did not give a good performance, and her mother's repeated criticism only added to her low self-confidence at this point. *Tu Amol cha pudhe pheeki padli* (you were insipid compared to Amol) was Vidyatai's staunch opinion. Such paradoxes are so filmi!

It is uncanny how the role defined and reflected Smita's search for the perfect love and fulfilling relationship in her own life. Jhelum and Sumita are among the two close friends who see this parallel. They understood this side of Smita with sympathy, without being judgemental. For them, the caring, fun-loving, generous friend was the essential Smita. It was a spontaneous generosity that never counted the cost.

Smita's generosity to strangers sometimes led to embarrassment. Anita might be biased as the doting sister but she also has the objectivity of a professional. With the distance of time, nostalgia is inevitable but it can also clear the mists of idealization. Anita recalls: 'When Smi was going to the studio, a stranger accosted her, saying, Didi, I am in a lot of trouble, please help me, and so on. She took out whatever was in her purse and gave it to that man. She realized she

had no cash on her when she had to fill petrol. She had to borrow money from the driver. Sometimes, she would come back home and say, Maa, I need money. Just gave it someone who needed it! We got used to this,' says Anita, with unconcealed pride in her sister's giving nature. Smita donated the cash prize that goes with the National Award to charity.

The second-floor apartment in Rock Cliff opposite Bandra's Joggers Park is the home that Smita had hoped to live in but never did. She wanted a sea-facing flat and yearned to enjoy the rain splashing through open windows, remembers Vidyatai. Smita actually wanted the fourth floor but settled for the second. She would come by whenever she had time, to see how the house was coming up. She would have chai from the kettle along with the workers. Smita wanted the first guests in her home to be the workers who built it. Anita's memory is a mix of regret and pride. Yes, the first meal served in the new flat was for the workers but Smita was not there to serve it personally as she had wished to. This was not a gesture meant to buy good PR but that was Smita – egalitarian to her bones.

Anita remembers another such incident. During the shooting of *Gaman* in Kotwara, where the unit had stayed in Muzaffar Ali's ancestral haveli, Smita became friendly with an old lady who took care of the house and its guests. Anita is not sure but thinks the old lady was in one scene of the film. A few years later, the old burkha-clad lady came searching for Smita to her Tardeo house, along with her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. She did not seek out others of the unit – it was only Smita she wanted to visit. Smita welcomed them with a meal and clothes for everyone – as she would do for anyone who came from their village. (Incidentally, The Smita Patil Charitable Trust has constructed an English-medium, co-educational high school named after Smita in Shirpur, their ancestral village, where the girls spent a lot of time. Smita especially loved staying there.) The smell of the village home never left her subconscious. Did she try to pass it on to her dear nephew Adeet?

Adeet, Anita's son who Smita helped raise for the first four- five years along with her mother, is overwhelmed by his childhood memories of his Mityama he adored and who adored him with equal fervour. When Adeet was born in the US during Anita's residency, Vidyatai and Smita went to help her. They brought the baby back with them to India. Anita remembers how Smita fought with her. Anita says: 'Smi gave me so many gaalis when I was sending my child away to India. Why did you bring this child into the world? Who asked you to do it? What kind of a mother are you! My God, did I have it! She could not fathom how a mother could do this. It was beyond all comprehension to her. I will never do this, she said. I'll never send my

child away. I heard her out. But she was also very happy because she had a baby to play with for the next five years. Adeet was raised primarily by Maa, Smi and Manya. But boy! Was she mad at me!' To Adeet, now based in New York where he works as visual designer and photographer, Bombay was home and Maa was his mother. He had the loving aunts who doted on him but it is Mityama who is clearly his second surrogate mother.

A word about family names. Their father had special names for all his daughters. Anita was Papiya, Smita was Mitya and Gita was Manya (that is the name the youngest Patil sister is known by universally). Smita insisted that she was not to be called Mausi or aunty. She claimed the rights of a mother. Anita recalls how Smi set the rules. Vidyatai was Motama, Anita was Papiyama, Smita was Mityama and Manya was Manyama. The names endure to this day. Anita's ringtone is'*I love you Papiyama*', in Zoey Smita's (Adeet's daughter) charming treble.

Smita took Adeet everywhere. Kashmir, Goa, the studio where she was shooting. He remembers how he went behind the chair she was sitting on – it was a judge's chair – and he slid his arms through the slats to hug her (the film was *Dilwala* in which Smita played a judge). The director had to shout, 'Cut!' Not a word of reprimand from the indulgent aunt. Adeet says, his Mityama never raised her voice but just pampered him with her affection. She cocooned him with her love and care. He once remembers getting stuck in a crowd of over a hundred people as they were driving out from the location which was most probably a slum. Smita's car was a Honda City. She stood up and the sun roof was open. She patiently signed autographs for the clamorous crowd for over an hour. The adult Adeet says it was so typical of Mityama. She never felt that she was the star, someone superior to others. The way she treated everyone as her equal came from within. Her driver Bahadur was family. They trusted him to take care of Smita. On a visit to see his very ill grandmother, Adeet says it is the drivers, domestic help and the other staff who take care of his grandparents that make Bombay home for him. Something that he imbibed from his aunt whom he misses to this day. He is surrounded by her photographs in his office and home. His five-year-old daughter Zoey's middle name is Smita.

After Adeet went back to Chicago, Smita visited him as often as possible. 'She slipped under the radar,' he says, appreciative now of how she had to evade the press. Anita fondly remembers Smita dressing up for Halloween, to go trick or treating with her boys. Even when she was there in an official capacity, she tried to dodge the press and PR machine to spend time with her darling nephews. The prestigious Chicago Art Academy hosted a retrospective of her films in

1982. Smita would dutifully present the films, stay for the Q&A session and slink out of the obligatory dinner. Anita is amazed: 'They call her all the way here. She comes and the first thing she says is, don't tell anybody I am here. I don't want to meet anyone, give any press conferences or meet any journalists. I just want to stay home and play with the kids. The Who's Who of Chicago art world were planning to take Smi out for a big dinner. Somebody else would have jumped at that but my sister has to go and say: "I came here for the screening and Q&A afterwards. I am not going out to dinner because I am here for the film and to talk to people." They felt insulted because they had sponsored her.'

Smita loved the company of kids. It was not just Adeet. She took Subhash's two boys and Adeet on her own to Goa for a holiday, no other adult to help look after them. These impromptu holidays sometimes ended in embarrassment for Smita and the friends who were with her. Smita's friend Sumita tells of one such incident. Sumita is frank to a fault: 'We – Smita, Jhelum with her son and I with my two – were at the Taj Village in Goa when it was pretty new. Smita was now a recognized figure and so we went swimming at night. One night as we were coming back, a woman at the hotel said crudely: But she has no breasts! And we soon left.'

Sumita continues, 'Smita was not bothered about her dark colour. It bothered her when it came to mainstream films and the make-up she had to put on for that. And also the costumes for these films. She was flat-chested and had to wear padded blouses and flashy clothes. The clothes she had to wear were very much against her grain when her personal taste was for traditional, lovely handloom saris. She was basically comfortable with people but there was also this whole condescending attitude to Ghatis.'

Sumita ruminates on the irony of a flat-chested star doing two of the most commented-upon scenes that focused on Smita's body. Sumita maintains: 'The bathing scene in *Chakra* and the rain song in *Namak Halaal* made her feel awkward.'

Understandable in a country – more so its film industry – with a mammary fixation. Smita's sensuous appeal was contained in her whole persona, not just a voluptuous figure. Aditya Bhattacharya, the smitten eighteen-year-old of *Mandi* and a brilliant photographer besides a quirky film-maker says it all in a sentence: 'Smita was the most womanly woman I knew.' He shot'One day in the life of an actor', featuring Smita, for *Debonair*, the magazine that took pride in its pictures (not the centre spreads of desperate wannabes) and quality writing.

This is as good a point as any to write of Smita the photographer. The camera loved her and she loved the camera. Govind Nihalani,

after the shoot of *Nishant*, never tired of telling all those he could: Shoot her from any angle and she looks as stunningly beautiful. A truth borne out many times over. It is only after her death that by a fortuitous coincidence, Prof. Kirti Trivedi of IIT Bombay discovered Smita's skill behind the camera. Photographs taken by Smita were featured in *JS*(*Junior Statesman*). Trivedi, who studied design and then went on to head the department at IIT, was struck by her sense of composition and skilled execution. His credentials – academic and aesthetic – are impeccable (his tome on Asian design published by Singapore University is to die for). He did not know anybody in films and was just a fan of Smita – first the actor, now the photographer. Providentially, somebody gave him Smita's mother's number and he contacted her. Vidyatai, the ever-welcoming hostess, invited him home. Trivedi asked for the photos taken by Smita. The family was amazed. What photographs, they asked.

Shivajirao remembered Smita staying back by herself in the remote place where she had accompanied him for the inauguration of a branch of a cooperative bank he chaired. There was not even a guesthouse there. They cleaned up a couple of rooms for the visitors. Smita remained for a week, taking pictures of the local people and landscape to her heart's content. The family saw her with a camera and took it for granted that it was just a hobby that did not merit much thought, and didn't care for preserving her work.

Prof. Trivedi explained their worth and they hunted through old boxes and rummaged through cupboards till they laid hands on the treasure. Manya was of immense help in this project. She headed the Smita Patil Foundation and in collaboration with Industrial Design Centre, IIT, Bombay, mounted an exhibition '*Through the Eyes of Smita*', at NCPA's Piramal Gallery. It was also shown in Ahmedabad. But the plan of taking it all over the country was abandoned. Manya showed part of this collection at New York's Lincoln Centre where she held a retrospective of Smita's films.

Most of the fifty photographs in this exhibition are of her co-stars and things happening in the studio between shots. Smita captured Poonam Dhillon in a way that totally deglamourizes her and yet, brings out her essential beauty. Rauf Ahmed has an interesting story of Smita's desire to take Hema Malini's photos. Smita wanted Rauf to take her to Hema Malini's house to shoot Hema's pictures. She found Hema very beautiful and wanted to shoot her without make-up which, according to Smita, camouflaged Hema's real beauty. Smita convinced Hema to get her pictures taken without make-up, promising to destroy the entire roll and hand it over to her, in case they did not meet her subject's approval. Smita was nudging Rauf about the promised idlis for breakfast. Hema took Rauf aside and confided that she had idlis

just enough for one person. Hema then asked Rauf to eat something else so that Smita could have her idlis. The photos came out really well and Rauf published a collage of it. Hema too was satisfied with the photo shoot. What an uncanny coincidence. The new cinema's icon raptly capturing the dream girl of mainstream films.

Amitabh Bachchan expressed his amazement when he saw Smita with her camera.'She had full knowledge of what she was doing, how and when to open the lens, take out parts and reassemble them. I was surprised. I asked her, how do you know all this? Camera is my shaukh, she replied. If it is my passion, I will learn everything about it.'*

The NCPA exhibition got good reviews, not because the subjects and the photographer were film celebrities. Excerpts from art critic Niyatee Shinde's review in the *Indian Express*affirm this: 'Smita Patil's work as a photographer is almost a synthesis that largely defies definition … it is an attempt to provide an explanation to the "multi-talented, multi-faceted nature of a woman who lived less in a time span, but yet left behind an enduring, indelible mark". Metaphors of life, living, livelihood and sustenance are used in her work that are nothing if not works of art in strategic relationship with the dynamics of affirmation, of life … Taking the prosaic and mundane from the surroundings and infusing the whole with enough vitality, she appears to create an entirely different reality. Arriving at new unsuspected images. From the chaos of the everyday is brought out a chaos of emotions that borders on the fantastical. The effort results in images which are an intangible reality … the attempt is purely spontaneous to evoke and reflect the intrinsic beauty of a precise moment…

'Take, for instance, the collage-like picture, framed from a tree branch, of unit hands at break time. Only someone such as Smita would scramble up a tree [the hoity-toity airs of a film star were not for her] and take a photograph that conveys a saturated, sympathetic fellow feeling. A feeling that persists in all her images. Her portraits of colleagues and family members bring out, amazingly, the depths of their character, reflecting not only individual traits but also the sensitivities and sensibilities of that person. An understanding of space and mass distribution, of tonal values to enhance the starkness of the situation and above all, an almost reflexive control on the shutter … The tour de force is a black cat crawling majestically across a wall set in a maze of masonry. In every frame is an applied intelligence. Her sense of humour and wit are never side-lined. Then, there is no sentimentality involved. The images reveal the consummate skill of a designer and function as significant works of art despite their anecdotal flavour.'

Rounding off a long, detailed rave review is the telling sentence:

‘Smita’s experience with the camera was as casual though intense as the time she spent on film sets.’

This leads to the inevitable question. Would Smita have evolved into a director, given her passion for the camera and the originality and insights of her images? Jabbar Patel affirms casually: Why not? If she could grasp the narrative arc of a story, she could make a film too. Aruna is more forthcoming and her observation is based on facts. Aruna was planning her independent film – hitherto she had made commercially viable, thematically different films with Vikas – with Smita as the protagonist. The film was *Rihaee*, with its feminist validation of female desire and questioning sexual double standards. It would have been a totally different film with Smita, asserts Aruna who finally made it with Hema Malini after Smita died. Smita had it all planned out. She was pregnant then and planning to leave Raj Babbar after the baby was born. She would not only act in *Rihaee* but also assist Aruna in direction. Once the baby was a little older, she would bring it to the sets and be able to work and care for the baby alongside. Her baby was born and raised in the home that Smita dreamed about. But it was Smita’s Maa who raised this longed-for child.

Smita, the actor par excellence and the woman with a turbulent life, was an enigma to the press. It was fascination, all right. Publications never tired of featuring her, speculating about her personal life, and wanted that arresting face on their pages. It is not surprising that magazines straightaway saw two sides of the immensely photogenic Smita. Bhawana Somaaya was a cub reporter for a not-so-well-known magazine when she first met Smita. ‘We were the same age. I remember doing a photo shoot in her house. There was none of the fuss and frills of today’s photo shoot then. Smita would wear saris one by one and come out. During a break, I went inside with her to select a sari. I was intrigued, there was a walk-in wardrobe. She would change inside the wardrobe. I also took a look and browsed around her saris. People used to write that hers was a middle-class home; neat and clean, the tapestry had covers at the back for the headrest. To me it looked like a home because we also came from homes like that and we were not exposed to the grandeur and glamour that existed around us. By the end of the shoot, she was getting very tense, there were of course no mobiles then. Shyam Benegal was ringing up on the black phone again and again. She had an appointment to go to his office. That was the beginning of the planning of *Bhumika*. Either for a sitting or a look test, she kept saying she would be there in an hour. And then fifteen minutes. Finally she said: I cannot do this anymore. I cannot keep him waiting. I said: Okay just change once for the last shot and then you can go.’ Though

she was getting late for such an important meeting with her mentor, Smita finished the shoot professionally. Bhawana also noticed something else. Smita was a chai drinker and had her tea with honey – not a fashionable habit those days.

Piroj Wadia, who was a staffer at *Cine Blitz*, had a different brief. She had arranged a photo shoot with Smita but it was to be only Western wear – strictly no saris. The late Jagdish Mali was the photographer. According to Piroj, he lit her best and, over the years, Smita was very comfortable with him. But not at that moment. This was her first glamour shoot and she was thrown a bit off kilter. This was new territory for her. Yet, she was very innovative. Mali was not happy with the top she chose with her black pants. Smita then came up with a long piece of yellow cotton cloth with white flowers printed on it. She wrapped it round her torso like a halter neck and it looked fantastic. Mali chose brown-grey pedal pushers in a velvety material for the next shot. She teamed it with a cap-sleeved striped T-shirt. The prop was a bamboo ladder and she posed brilliantly, with one gold-sandalled foot perched on it. Mali used it as a poster. 'Smita got used to Jagdish and wore what was expected of her image,' concludes Piroj. Jagdish Mali is on record that Smita never threw any tantrums, any attitude. 'She created a comfort zone with the photographer,' says Piroj.

Smita did pore over the occasional *Vogue* and flirtatiously tried out French berets worn at a rakish angle. The late eminent and erudite critic Iqbal Masud (whom we teased of being in love with Smita) recalled the incident with affectionate amusement, when he was attending the film festival at Nantes along with Smita. She posed with the beret and asked the fashion novice Iqbal: How does it look? He confessed later that he was tongue- tied with shock and it was Girish Karnad, who was also part of the delegation, who rallied him: Come on, Iqbal, she is a young woman in her mid-twenties. And moreover, she is in France! It was a young woman's passing vanity. Bhawana recollects how other stars were curious, even envious, of Smita's dress sense: 'When I was doing a photo shoot with Dimple she would say, how originally Smita combined East and West in her look. She'd wear boots with such style.'

It was not just a few magazines and photographers that saw Smita's dusky glamour's potential. Smita herself was very fond of Western clothes – not just the jeans she lived in as a teenager – but off-the-shoulder dresses, halter tops, fitted trousers and boots. Aruna remembers a party on a boat that her then husband Vikas had thrown for her birthday. Smita was dressed in an off- the-shoulder white dress that showed off her long slim neck and sexy collar bones. Vinod Khanna was at the party and Aruna recalls how the two stayed up for

a long time on the upper deck. If Smita was involved with a man, she did not hide it. There was none of this *we are just good friends* spiel routinely doled out to a persistent press. Whether it was Mandip Kakkar, from Benegal's unit, or Vinod Khanna, it was open, and Smita did not bother with what the world said. She was the original'bindaas' girl, says Jhelum admiringly. She adds: 'When in a relationship, she gave it her all.' Jhelum won't name names but she says Smita adroitly evaded unwanted attentions from men – she could remain friends with them if she valued it. Om Puri calls her'a Bohemian, very bubbly, full of life. Never saw her low or depressed about anything. Very liberated and progressive in her thoughts and work.'

Smita was sensitive but did not really care for what anybody said. The only time she was really hurt by the press was when Vimla Patil, the editor of *Femina*, wrote a moralizing open letter to Smita on her involvement with a married Raj Babbar. Anita remembers how raw and lacerated Smita felt after this public castigation by a senior woman journalist. She also had a quick temper and sometimes acted impulsively without calculating the consequences. Smita gave an interview to Deepa Gahlot for *Filmfare* about her earlier involvement with Vinod Khanna. She had second thoughts and wanted Deepa not to carry it. By then, it was too late. Smita was incensed and asked Pritish Nandy, *Filmfare* editor, to sack Deepa. Of course, Pritish being the pugnacious Nandy, retaliated brutally with an interview with Nadira Babbar who was nothing short of vicious. Smita still did not know how to play media games or know that it would boomerang on her. This was sometime in 1985–86.

The media was much harsher about Smita than the Hema Malini–Dharmendra marriage that happened around the same time. Smita's art cinema icon status and her known commitment to social work left her open to unsparing criticism from a media that seemed to hold her to a higher standard. Lalita rationalizes: Hema Malini kept her affair low key and handled the press with more dignity while a harried Smita was left floundering. Smita lacked parental support at that vulnerable time. Her father was much more understanding, as were her sisters. He argued with his wife that you can't really come in the way of a man–woman attraction, their chemistry. The two were adults. Shivajirao said he was all set to attend Smita's wedding (she had invited them to a ceremony presided over by the controversial god man Chandraswami) but cancelled it at the last minute. Vidyatai would not confer approval on something she was so totally against. Anita is firm:'I also believe you can't interfere in personal chemistry. So when Smi came to Chicago with Raj, I was perfectly okay with it. Who am I to sit in judgement of two adults? I accepted it as her decision. There were no ifs and buts about it.'

Unfortunately for Smita, her understanding big sister was in the US when she was pregnant and Raj Babbar did not keep the commitment of getting a divorce and marrying her. Most of the media and the industry seemed to know this and mocked Smita when they were not reviling her. A woman needs her family during her first pregnancy, more so when her partner does not make her his first priority. It is to her mother that a pregnant woman turns to instinctively for emotional and practical support. More so for Smita who idolized her mother and made her a role model, consciously or otherwise. Smita rebelled yet craved for her Maa's approval. This conflict over her choice of a married Raj Babbar as her partner was traumatic for both. The relationship between Smita and her mother was a fraught one: Smita's anger and hurt battling her mother's disappointment stemming from her high moral standards. Vidyatai held her daughter up to a higher standard precisely because she thought she had inculcated the right values in her daughters. When Smita espoused the cause of women, how could she break up another woman's marriage? This was the question that haunted Vidyatai who wanted to remain true to what she believed in, even if it meant letting a loved daughter suffer the pain of rejection. No mother wants her daughter branded a home-wrecker. This was a deeply painful time for Smita and Vidyatai, who was respected and loved by Smita's friends as well. The pain was no less for the mother who was faulted for being so unbendingly judgemental.

It was friends who were Smita's biggest support system during this time. Jhelum and Aruna would drop everything and come to Smita's side when she made that vulnerable call. Evenings could be long and lonely. Jhelum and Smita watched *Julia*together and Smita said, that's us.

It is a strange mixture of tradition and defiance of rules that made Smita's conflict even more poignant. And hard to understand for critics who thought she should not hanker for societal approval, of being invited to a haldi kumkum held for married women. Bharathi Pradhan, another veteran journalist, warned me she is not a Smita fan when I talked to her.'I found a lot of contradictions in her. For a woman who openly accompanied a married Vinod Khanna to Rajneesh meetings and stood with the boys (Akshay and Rahul), looking after them, to claim to be "married" to a married Raj Babbar … if she was bold and liberated enough to do this, why cling to haldi kumkum and attend functions for married women held by Maharashtrian ladies? I saw her at such a haldi kumkum gathering.' Bharathi thinks the press was perhaps more hostile to Smita because she died so soon, while other couples like Hema–Dharmendra, Boney Kapoor–Sridevi, Shabana–Javed Akhtar have been accepted over time

by the public. Bharathi throws a poser: 'Is this a change in societal attitude or sheer star power of these couples that broke through conventional morality?' She was one of the few journalists who called Smita a confused person and listed her contradictions in her *Midday*column after Smita's death. Cynicism becomes second nature for a journalist who has covered the industry over decades and speaks with unflinching frankness. Bharathi however concedes that Smita was a warm and friendly person.

Marriage to Raj Babbar and the ugly media stories in the aftermath are the elephant in the room when it comes to Smita's life. Vidyatai repeated what Smita had said in a self-critical mood: 'I can't get out of our purana sanskar nor can I embrace contemporary morality fully.' The grief-and-guilt-stricken mother went on to say: 'She was too honest and very simple. At twenty-eight, twenty-nine, it's too late to wait to have a child, to meet a man and get married.' Arun Khopkar who was distressed at Smita's propensity to fall in love with men unworthy of her (and many men fell in love with her far too easily) said: 'There were many clamouring voices in her life. If you didn't have that kind of mother or father, you would not be set up as a role model yourself. To have this relationship with a man who was married and call it a second marriage and justify it, makes the whole thing far more complex. If she was living in the West, for example, it would be entirely different and would not matter. If tabloids were interested, that's entirely understandable. It wouldn't matter two hoots to most of society.'

The problem was Smita lived in the India of the 1980s, when the whole question of women's liberation had acquired overtones of puritanical zeal and open assertion of her sexuality was not acceptable. Smita struggled with her contradictions. To come back to the haldi kumkum event, Smita was gratified to be invited, claims Lalita. It meant acceptance by society. Aruna talks of how Smita longed for a godh bharai ceremony that celebrates and blesses a woman's pregnancy. Aruna's mother held this ceremony for Smita. One thing emerges from what everyone said – old friends Jhelum and Aruna, new friends Lalita and Rinki who lived close by and walked with Smita in the evenings – that she was ready to end her relationship with Raj Babbar once the baby was born. Her child was the greatest desire of her life and now that was to be fulfilled, she could dispense with a relationship that had become controlling and ugly. Lalita recalls the defining moment of decision. Aruna had invited Smita and Lalita to lunch for the last Ganesh festival she was celebrating in her marital home. Smita was heavily pregnant and retired to rest in the bedroom while Aruna was busy looking after other guests. That was when she announced to Lalita: I am going to

walk out on Raj Babbar after the baby is born.

Decision made in her mind, Smita threw herself into the big protest morcha the film industry held in 1986. It culminated in Hope 86, a huge programme at Wankhede Stadium. She was marching on Marine Drive and beside her was Hema Malini who was very solicitous. She told Smita: 'You have done enough now. Go and rest.' According to Shivajirao, Smita's particular concern during this protest was the plight of ushers and other staff working in cinema theatres. She was worried that they did not have the wherewithal to survive a prolonged strike. She made it her special cause. Smita was busy shooting and dubbing late into her pregnancy. Did she have premonition of early death? Some stories that appeared soon after her death mentioned that Smita had shared one such premonition with Poonam Dhillon. Meera Dewan's documentary, *Searching for Smita* (1989, Films Division), has this clip of Poonam Dhillon recalling what Smita said: 'I will die at thirty-one.' Subhash Awchat narrates another eerie story of her intuitive powers with relish. The two had gone to Taj Hotel and they passed by a foreigner, French perhaps, in the lobby. Smita paused and looked at the man. Subhash maintains that Smita saw auras around people. She urged Subhash to ask the stranger if he had a recent accident that hurt his left arm and shoulder. The surprised man said, 'Yes, how did you know?'

It could be one of Subhash's more bizarre tales. But an unconscious feeling that perhaps Smita gave these almost paranormal vibes to people she connected with lodges itself in your mind. After her death, Amitabh Bachchan is on record in the interview to *Lehren*: 'She had a sixth sense … she had a premonition. I was shooting for *Coolie* in Bangalore. I was staying at the West End Hotel. My association with Smita was limited to the sets. Other than that I never made contact with her. We never met socially. But one night, at about one, I got a call in my room. The operator said Smita Patil wants to talk to you. I first thought it was a prank. But then I took the call and it was Smita. She said, Amit-ji, I am sorry to disturb you, but are you okay? I said, yes, I am fine. She said, no I just got up and I had a very bad dream. I just wanted to call you and find out if you were okay. She was on location somewhere. And that was it. Next morning I had my accident. It was just unbelievable. Throughout the two or three months I was in the ICU, she was a regular visitor. When I came home, she would come every evening and enquire about me. I can never forget that. She was a unique lady.'

Sumita has written an almost surreal description of what she experienced in a letter to Anita. Somewhere 'they are karmically connected', she writes, before describing her dream: 'What is poignant to say here, and I do not know if I have ever told you, a week before

Smi delivered Prateik, while I was having an afternoon nap, I had a very lucid dream, that Smi entered my house pregnant, in a very special golden fluorescent light one experiences in special sunsets, floated around, and then slowly disintegrated out of my bedroom window and merged into the green of the trees beyond my window. It felt so real, so palpable, like a long goodbye, and seeped in a sort of special message … I called her immediately as I woke up.'

Foreboding intimations of a death?

*Translation of what he said in Hindi for *Murtimant Asmita*, Lalita Tamhane's audio visual live programme

8

The Way We Remember Her

Riverbank plum-tree
Do your reflected
Blossoms really flow away?

—Haiku, eighteenth-century master, Buson

How can one explain in words emotions that run too deep for tears? It was by all accounts beyond comprehension. How could a young woman in this day and age die of post-delivery complications? And that too someone like Smita Patil, who would have not lacked the best treatment. Or was it viral encephalitis as neurologists argued? How was it that one of the best hospitals in Bombay could not help Smita win against the sudden fatal infection? This bereavement was so personal, as if we had lost a dear family member, not someone remote who cast a spell from the screen. Smita was so real. You felt you could touch her, even if you had never met her. At least, that was my personal experience as I mourned a woman who had long ceased being an actor; she had infiltrated my mind unknown to me. There were other deaths of stars that we mourned – Nargis, Meena Kumari and Nutan – but none hit us like a sledgehammer. Death indeed was cruel. Did the gods really love her to take her away so young? Or were they playing a karmic joke on us?

Post lethargy came anger. Slow burning anger. How could she go just like that? Feverish activity followed; get all the news you could. It was pre-internet days. There were not that many 24x7 news channels chasing stories and TRPs, and reducing even tragedy to a tamasha, a

spectacle of public mourning, a hyped soap opera. So it was a slow wait for conflicting reports and confusing stories, medical reports and hypotheses. There were a couple of magazine deadlines, to write essays and assessments of what Smita meant to our cinema, minus the emotion, cold critical logic in place. It was a necessary exercise in restraint. It brought a semblance of rationality and distance demanded by the discipline of writing a balanced tribute, where you had to evaluate Smita's contribution to our cinema and temper the praise with objectivity. Hyperbole comes easily to us. To find measured prose and even tone in the midst of aching grief was tough.

The critical exercise helped. So many people recall what they were doing when they heard of her sinking health; it is still fresh in their memory. So many people who wanted to be there when she was in hospital, could not. Smita had wanted Jabbar and his gynaecologist wife Mani to be there at her baby's birth but they were away. Jabbar had to rush back from Daund, grappling with guilt that he had passed through Bombay but could not meet Smita. The other old Pune friend Mohan Agashe was in Kathmandu shooting for Satyajit Ray. He too had rushed through Bombay to get to Nepal. Something was amiss. Deepak Sawant took leave of Smita to make a documentary on the armed forces, because she would not be shooting for a while. His work got completed much earlier than he expected. He felt he had to come back to Bombay. He paid a TTC and got a seat on the train. It was in Bhopal that he heard over the radio of Smita's critical condition. He rushed straight to Jaslok when he reached Bombay. It was too late. He kept vigil outside the morgue till Anita could come home from the US. He felt it was his duty as her guardian brother.

When news spread of Smita being rushed to Jaslok in a critical condition, magazines held back planned covers in the pragmatic, news-first code they adhere to. Newspaper stories flew back and forth, rife with accusations of medical neglect, hysterical witch-hunting and half-digested medical theories of what went wrong. All this when the family and friends were shell-shocked. Why did Smita insist on staying at home with her baby even when her fever was going up? Why did no one insist that she go back to the hospital in time? Who would console or explain to Adeet why his doctor Mom could not fix his Mityama's condition? He pleaded with his mother, please do something to make Mityama better. How do you explain to a nine-year-old that the virus was virulent and her brain had stopped? All kept vigil – in anger, hope, utter helplessness – that a miracle might happen. But there was no miracle.

Smita's make-up man Deepak was in tears. He finally had to do what Smita bade him do so routinely: send me off like a suhagan. Smita had told him to dress her like a suhagan when she died.'I cried

when I did it. I don't know what I did,' said the heartbroken man to Meera Dewan for her documentary. And he says the same to me when I meet him. From this distance, he can now explain how difficult it was. Her face had bloated in the morgue. Deepak drew on all his remembered skill to shape the contours of her face and made her look beautiful one last time. Bhawana remembers how so many people – Smita's hairdresser, sundry others who hung around the sets – approached her to tell their moments with Smita. Everyone was seeking catharsis.

For some, there is a continuity after death. Deepak and his wife Sarod keep a vigil of another kind. All these years, they are the ones who visit Smita's parents unfailingly on her death anniversary and birthday.

Now, it is easier to look back and see what went wrong. Go back and read the tributes and detailed accounts of a funeral procession that was unprecedented. Huge crowds gathered from Bandra to Shivaji Park and were seen on TV. Heart-warming stories of Smita's final days filter from private memory to public sharing. At last, it was a tragic healing time for Smita and her Maa.

There is a comforting postscript to Smita's troubled relationship with her mother. Anita recalls her parents visiting her in the summer of 1986. They returned to Bombay either late August or early September, she doesn't remember clearly. Something seemed to have thawed Vidyatai's stern resolve. Smita called her mother and requested if she would accompany her for a check-up with her doctor, the renowned Dr Soonawala whose consulting rooms were at Kemps Corner in south Bombay. Smita lived in Bandra and drove alone all the way to town while her parents were still in Tardeo. Soon, they settled into a pattern. Smita would pick up her mother who had her favourite amti bhat in a dabba and lovingly fed the daughter hungry for food from her mother's kitchen while they drove to the doctor. This was during the final two months of her pregnancy when check-ups were more frequent. Smita vowed to make up for not being nice to Maa in the troubled recent past. Anita remembers Smita asking her mother to make the traditional infant garment, a cape with a hood, called kunchala. She asked her mother to sing all the Marathi songs that she had sung to her in childhood and wrote them all in a notebook. Sadly, she would not croon the old lullabies to her baby…

Lalita meticulously planned a surprise for Smita. Nutan had wanted to meet Smita and timed her visit to Breach Candy Hospital when Lalita would be there. Around 11.30 a.m., Lalita left the room and came back with Nutan to Smita's great delight. Nutan cooed over the baby and had her first – and last – meeting with the young actor she came to know through a mutual friend. Small pleasures that are so

poignant as we look back. Everything comes underlined with tragic irony.

The abiding question remains: What made Smita so unforgettable? Not only to her peers, her generation and close associates, but even a young schoolgirl growing up in Bombay who absolutely idolized her. Or a current stage actress who drew inspiration from an actor that her parents loved. Jitesh Pillai, currently editor of *Filmfare,* religiously writes a love letter to Smita on her anniversary. He asks older journalists like Bhawana to tell him what Smita was like. Arun Khopkar and I talk about this connection we experience with Smita and how even younger people today seem to share it. Arun, studying Spanish with the same diligence he brought to his other pursuits, remarks: 'Actually, in my Spanish class, there are young people who feel that. She is the one actress who had that quality. I think Waheeda, when she was working with Guru Dutt, had that quality. An internal strength that we connect with.'

The Guru Dutt reference is painfully relevant. His suicide at thirty-nine devastated people who loved his films. The vacuum left by a promise not fully realized, of what else might have been possible, haunts us. We feel the same way – agonizingly – about Smita. Smita bequeathed a legacy that any actor anywhere in the world would be proud of. She is both inspiring and unattainable for those aspiring to reach that degree of integrity and creative intensity. To convey this sense of irreplaceable loss, I thought it best to include what passionate admirers of Smita have written. Satyajit Ray wrote to Andrew Robinson when he heard of Smita's death: 'There is really no one to replace her.'*

Rauf Ahmed, then editor of *Filmfare*, paints a revealing word portrait of an incomparable woman who was a star, and a dear friend.**

Goodbye Smita

The first interview in 1975 was the beginning of a long friendship. For the next eleven years, we kept regularly in touch. I don't remember being so close to anyone else in the industry. It was very easy being friends with her. She was uncomplicated, without complexes, always brutally frank. Never made demands. She never angled for publicity. Whenever she felt strongly about something, she would write a little note and pass it on to me. Those notes often provoked me to ask her questions, and the answers invariably went into my articles. At times

she would resent it. ‘It was a personal note, not for you to publish, I’d told you that,’ she’d protest.

‘Sorry, I found what you wrote very interesting,’ I’d wriggle out.

She seldom allowed me to interview her. ‘You know me too well for that,’ she would say.

I remember, in 1982, when I launched the magazine *Movie*as founder-editor, I persuaded a close friend of mine, late Frank Simoes, to interview her. It turned out to be a fascinating interview with Smita at her candid best nonchalantly letting her hair down like never before. She regarded it her best-ever interview. Frank couldn’t get over the ‘incredible woman’ called Smita ‘Patel’ for months! That’s what invariably happened to those who came in contact with Smita. Her distinct individuality cast a spell on them. She was a woman apart, one of a kind.

An incident in 1980 almost blew up our friendship. I had put on the cover of the magazine I was then editing a bold picture of hers with one bare leg stretched across and a sten-gun in hand. The story was titled ‘Sex Power’. The photograph had been shot by Anand Mahendroo, an aspiring film-maker of the time, for a film he was dreaming of making with her. Smita was livid when she saw the cover. She thought she had been‘betrayed’ and‘exploited’. She conveyed her anger through a common friend, refused to answer my calls. She didn’t speak to me for the next six months. Then one day we ran into each other quite by accident and she smiled spontaneously as if nothing had happened. Suddenly she remembered something and said in mock anger, ‘I don’t want to talk to you, you traitor.’ Then on second thoughts, she said, ‘Actually it’s my mother who had felt betrayed by you and very angry. She was very upset when she saw my picture and your headline. She used to think very highly of you, now she thinks a journalist can never be a friend.’

It hurt, and she was quick to sense it.‘Actually, I shouldn’t be angry with you. That cover of yours made a lot of people in the industry believe that Smita Patil *can* look glamorous. Couldn’t you have chosen a more decent picture from that series?’ We were friends again.

When Smita signed her first ‘commercial’ film – Ramesh Sippy’s *Shakti* – I asked her about her earlier resolve not to ‘commercialize’ herself.‘I am not commercializing myself, stupid,’ she had snapped back. ‘I am trying to commercialize my so- called art films. If I become a star by chance, more people will watch the kind of films I love making. I will never stop making my kind of films,’ she asserted.

It was Jaya Bachchan who had recommended her for *Shakti*. Apparently, she (Jaya) was on the lookout for a new heroine for Amitabh Bachchan after she quit the scene and Amitabh stopped signing films with Rekha. Smita enjoyed the new experience, but felt

'terribly out of place' amidst stars. Both Raakhee and Dilip Kumar found the casually dressed girl 'too simple and clumsy to be a star'. 'And it dawned on me that stardom is not everyone's cup of tea,' she admitted. Nevertheless, she continued to act in mainstream films. She did it with uncanny conviction.

In 1982, she had told Frank Simoes that she was totally exhausted, 'not just by the gruelling schedules, but the entire business'. She was often affronted by the need to put on a façade and continue to 'act' off-camera as well. The saving grace was an occasional *Umbartha* that kept coming her way. She got obsessed with the character of the protagonist in the film, because she was a reflection of her mother in real life. Smita adored and idolized her mother. When she was done with *Umbartha*, she went through a period of nagging emptiness, which pushed her into a spell of depression.

'I had reached a stage where I had begun to see the futility of continuing to act in films. It had become a drag, and I was finding it hard to motivate myself. A strange sense of barrenness troubled me relentlessly,' she confessed. She got out of that gloomy phase soon enough though, thanks to a retrospective of her films in Paris organized by Costa Gavras. It rekindled her ambition.'In a way, the seven films shown in Paris, from *Bhumika* to *Umbartha*, represented the evolution of the Indian woman,' she observed. 'They symbolized my growth as an individual as well. The realization that I had done some real good work over the years rekindled my enthusiasm and I put my heart into work again.'

During that rejuvenated phase, she made several mainstream films (like *Amrit, Aakhir Kyon* and *Angarey*) even at the risk of being panned by critics. Her mere presence lent those films a touch of class. But there was still something amiss. Perhaps an inner resistance to go the whole hog in the madness-driven milieu of mainstream cinema. She was reluctant to play it hard. But then she wasn't one to do things half-hearted. She did learn as she groped along.

After the stupendous success of *Aaj ki Awaaz*, she admitted, 'I am finally beginning to understand the commercial idiom. When I was dubbing for the court scene one day, Mr (B.R.) Chopra walked in. After watching me for a while, he took me aside and said,"I have great respect for your talent, but in a film like *Aaj ki Awaaz* your kind of restraint will not work. You need to be dramatic, even if you feel you are going over the top." I understood what he meant when I was watching the film in a suburban theatre. People were applauding me as if they had discovered the actress in me for the first time.' But she had genuine reservations with it, on a deeper plane.

The day Shabana Azmi won her third National Award, Mahesh Bhatt had walked into her make-up room at Mehboob Studio and said,

'It's time you did something about it. She (Shabana) has already moved on to her third, one more than you (Smita had won two National Awards by then).'

'Who cares?' Smita had snapped back. 'I am not here to collect awards. I just want to do good work.'

Provocative as he was wont to being, Mahesh had countered, 'Don't make a virtue of your weaknesses. The trouble with you is, you are bogged down by your middle-class mind-set. Values have no place in a hard-fought game; there are no rights and wrongs. You are in the game, play it hard to win. Manipulate if you can, or someone else will manipulate you.'

When she mentioned it to me, I said maybe Mahesh had a point. 'At times you do tend to let people push you around, give up easily,' I said. She didn't answer. But it must have been playing on her mind. She called me later in the day.'I want to tell one thing, nobody pushes me around, nobody can,' she asserted. 'But I will never stoop low for personal gains. I do understand Mahesh's concern for me. He believes I haven't achieved what I could have. It's true, but I don't agree with him that I am losing out to Shabana Azmi because of my values. I am proud of the values I cherish, I have acquired them from my mother, who is a mirror image of the essential me.'

After a long pensive pause she added, 'Success is very important to me, but I don't evaluate my success in relation to somebody else's achievements. I will never manipulate. Awards and acclaim make sense to me only when I am convinced that I deserve them.'

A lot had been said about Smita's cold war with Shabana Azmi. The tension was palpable. It was never a figment of the media's imagination as it was made out. It irked Smita that Shabana was 'constantly playing games' to be one up on her, especially in the initial stages when she was coming to terms with her own insecurities. It took her a while to eject Shabana from her system.'I am convinced that the two of us can never be friends,' she said in despair. 'There is something fundamentally wrong about our relationship … we are poles apart as individuals.' It did hurt Smita when the press said that Shabana had outclassed her in *Arth*. Shabana's uncalled-for statement that Smita was better suited for supporting roles only aggravated things. She didn't think that Shabana had outclassed her. She felt that the film wasn't the right one to judge their comparative merits as actors. '*Arth* revolved around Shabana's character, I was a mere prop there. She was playing the easily identifiable character of a "wronged wife", which naturally appealed to a larger audience,' she said. The tension did ease considerably in the later stages after Javed Akhtar and Raj Babbar tried to bring the two closer, but the thaw seemed contrived to those who knew Smi.

In spite of her enormous capacity to give, Smita's relationships with men were never really smooth. More often than not, she ended up getting a raw deal. 'I am not an easy woman for any man to handle,' she would say. 'I give a lot, therefore expect my man to give as much. Such an ideal situation seldom exists.' She had lived dangerously on the precipice of emotional catastrophe. After two miscarried relationships, she had expected a lot from her commitment to actor Raj Babbar, who was already married with two grown-up children. She had clashed against all odds, even defied her parents for the first time, especially her mother, whom she had idolized all her life, to live with him. But it didn't work in the long run. It forced her into a vortex of misery in the end. But she braved through it all to fulfil her intense longing for motherhood.

She loved to court tensions. Her yet-to-be-born child's future worried her often.'I don't know what kind of life it's destined to face. It worries me,' she had told a friend a couple of months before she had delivered.

Motherhood sent spasms of ecstasy through her. 'Look, I have done it,' she told Jabbar Patel when she last met him. Jabbar had been one of her favourite directors, who had directed *Umbartha*, a film close to her heart.

Two or three days after her delivery, in the first week of December, I had called her to congratulate. 'I heard you got married. *Saala*, *ha*… [she had used her favourite expletive reserved for close friends], you didn't have the courtesy to tell me.' She had pushed me against the wall even before I could open my mouth! I told her that it had 'just happened', and that even I didn't know it would happen! Besides, we hadn't been in touch for a while.

'Do you like marriage?' she asked me, but before I could answer, she said, 'Come and see me tomorrow … come early, before the other visitors start dropping by. I have lots to tell you.' She sounded feeble, but happy. I landed up at her Carter Road apartment the next morning at 9 a.m. There already were visitors, including actress Rekha, who sat squatting on the floor in full white, attracting all eyes.

Ma took me aside and said, 'Smi is in the bath, she will take time … and there are so many people waiting already. It might be better if you dropped by early tomorrow, come by 8.30.' The tomorrow didn't dawn for me. Smi was hospitalized the same evening following some serious complications. I didn't want to see her in the hospital. I thought I'd rather wait till she returned home. If only I had known she would never return home alive!

Smi died on 13 December 1986.

Nandita Das, actor, writer, director, activist writes from the heart…

Smi: The Sister I Never Met

Like many others, I too grew up with Smita Patil's films. This was much before I stumbled into acting. But what was different from many others was that I didn't grow up watching mainstream films, so the kind of films that she worked in were my only exposure to Indian cinema. These were often poignant stories with well-etched characters and often had strong women in them. Smita Patil became the person she portrayed and blurred the line between the actor and the character. Whether it was *Bhumika, Aakrosh, Manthan* or *Bhavni Bhavai*, they all told unique stories that were inseparable from the roles she played in them.

For me, Smita Patil was an important influence in my early years. I remember watching *Subah*, the Hindi version of the Marathi film, *Umbartha*, and being deeply affected by it. Not sure if it happens to you, but at times I can't remember anything about the film, except the emotions and thoughts it evoked in me. In fact, *Subah* was one of the main reasons why I chose to do my master's in social work. It actually impacted my life's trajectory!

When I did *Fire*, my first film that was released, I was often compared to her! I didn't even dare take it as a compliment as I felt the similarity ended with the colour of our skin! Although for her, that too fluctuated when she did mainstream films, as she had to lighten her skin and become 'glamorous'. I could only imagine her struggles in straddling the two worlds of Indian cinema that almost reflected two diametrically opposite expectations of female actors.

It was much later, in 2000, that I realized that there were many more things in common between us. This journey of sisterhood started with my meeting her eldest sister, Anita Patil-Deshmukh. I met Anita in Chicago for a special screening of *Bawandar*, which was being organized by IDS, an NGO she volunteered with. It took us precisely one dinner evening to bond and from that day, Anita became Tai for me and Smita Patil was not just the actor on the screen, but Smi (that is who she is for her loved ones), a sister I could never meet.

Soon after, I shared my experiences with the film industry with Tai. She almost burst into tears as she began recalling incidents that Smi had gone through and how her responses were uncannily similar to mine. That day onwards, I would always stay with Tai when I went to Chicago. One day she gave me Smi's silver bracelet, which sadly

doesn't fit me (looks like Smi had thinner dainty wrists), but is one of my most precious possessions.

In some mystical way, I now feel part of the family as I have come to know of her beyond her role as an actor. When I heard about her struggles and dilemma in the industry, her simplicity and concerns, her values and passions … it all seemed too familiar. I feel like I know her, without ever having met her. Tai would often draw parallels while talking about her or me, as if we were talking about the same person! Smi's parents are Ma and Papa for me, and even though I don't meet them as often as I would want to, I am their 2 a.m. call if they ever need to talk. There are very few regrets in my life, and my longing for that sister I never met and can never meet is deep and sublime.

Smita Patil's place in India cinema is unquestionable, and so is Smi in my life.

Deepti Naval, actor, poet, painter, shared this poem with me. It is also on her website on the net.

Smita and I

Always on the run
Chasing our dreams
We met each time

At baggage claims
VIP lounges
Check-in counters

Stood a while together
Among gaping crowds
Spoke, unspoken words

Yearning to share
Yet afraid,
afraid Of ourselves

All around us
People cheering, leering
And we, like spectacles
Amidst all the madness

Trying to live a moment
Of truth
A glance, a touch
A feeling to hold on to
And move on…

The last time we sat together
Waiting for a flight
I remember I'd said,

'There must be another way
Of living this life'

For a long time
You remained silent Then,
Without blinking
Without turning Said,

'There isn't'
Today
You are gone, and
I'm still running

Still trying
To prove you wrong

Deepa Deosthalee is a film critic and writes a blog,'Film Impressions.' Her heartfelt essay describes what adoration can be.

Smita and I

I can't put a finger on exactly when I fell in love with her. I must have been ten or thereabouts. Memories only come back as random scraps, the kind I once gathered on the pages of a diary from a year gone by. Painstakingly, relentlessly, lovingly. The dates had lost their relevance but that thick book, its ugly brown cover adorned with the logo of a tin manufacturing company, was the sole repository of my obsession.

An unremarkable poster procured from a street vendor outside my school was stuck on the bedroom door. Unremarkable, because she wasn't my Smita in the strictest sense. A pink (or was it off-white?)

silk blouse, matching jacket, frozen in a mid-shot, her face caked with more make-up than it needed; a touch of awkwardness to the body language, the smile stiff and unyielding. Only the big black eyes gave her away. Her unwavering gaze was fixed on me every time I walked into the room. I'd sit at my table plodding through math homework and look at it from the corner of my eye to make sure she was still around. I'd carve her initials on my desk or scribble them on school notebooks and get my ears boxed for it.

It wasn't easy going to the movies those days. Not because there weren't any cinemas in town – I lived in Bombay after all – but because parents like mine didn't believe girls of impressionable minds should indulge in such frivolous activities. That didn't dent my enthusiasm though; besides, there was always a steady supply of benevolent uncles, aunts and older cousins who were happy to oblige. So once we went to watch a film in which she danced in the rain in a white sari with a red border, the hero thrusting himself on her in a manner only Hindi film heroes do to express love. I didn't understand much about these things back then. It was a blissful innocence, watching my favourite stars dancing together to a foot-tapping number in a darkened hall. And the memory of the song would stay with me for months; with very little television on offer and film outings far and few between, it was the imagination that scripted most daydreams.

And magazines helped flesh them out. Which had to be purchased from the raddiwala at throwaway prices. Buying fresh copies was out of the question – the concept of pocket money was unheard of, at least in resolutely middle-class households like ours. So that hours were spent at the corner shop browsing through magazines looking for her interviews and photographs, even small ones on the snippets pages. She wasn't the kind of glamorous star who made it to the cover on a regular basis – she probably danced in the rain with that superstar just to change that.

But they held retrospectives of her films in foreign lands. France, I think it was. It got written about in a Gujarati magazine accompanied by colour photographs. What a treat! Some time was spent cajoling a friend to read and describe the minutiae of Smita's Parisian sojourn; the only recollection now, that she had an opportunity to sample good wine. Several years later, I got my hands on a French poster of one of her celebrated films, and it still hangs on the wall of my study.

In my head she had a life of her own, a fulfilling one. A beautiful apartment overlooking the sea, tastefully done up with little furniture and lots of love. In mid-1986, a film magazine carried an interview accompanied by a huge photo spread shot in her house, her lover and she proudly posing in coordinated yellows and whites, she beaming in

the flush of pregnancy, leaning against her man,framed on the threshold of what I imagined must have been her drawing room. A black-and-white picture in another magazine, possibly a still from a film, with the caption, 'My rock of Gibraltar'. Then a few months later, another one of the same man sitting dishevelled under a tree. Must have been taken just after the funeral … And many dreadful stories thereafter of what may have been and what should have been.

So this one time I dragged my grandmother (who rarely, if ever, watched a film) to one of Smita's family melodrama–type adventures. She's a neglected homemaker whose philandering husband disowns her for her more glamorous cousin. Too much make-up and an uncharacteristically histrionic acting style apart, it was hugely cathartic for a girl firmly fed stories of virtue and redemption to watch her claw her way back. She gets successful, her ex-husband goes bankrupt and down on his knees begging her for forgiveness, while her friend and bulwark of several years finally marries her – the crowning glory of any Indian woman's life! Even if the actor who plays the man is much older than her. Smita did a bunch of these corny films dressed in bright-coloured saris, red lipstick, a prominent red bindi on her forehead and the mandatory sindoor and thick long mangalsutra to signify matrimonial purity. Usually the wronged woman, she suffers and gets humiliated repeatedly before being rescued from her miserable fate.

And then I remember the same woman's smouldering kohled eyes on posters of those other films – the kind where she doesn't mope or get pushed around. She battles valiantly on different fronts – to uphold her dignity, to find her purpose in life, to take on the male establishment, to break barriers of caste and class, or to merely survive – a true trailblazer. Suddenly she seemed so much more surefooted in dusty saris and weatherworn chappals against defiantly unromantic backdrops – slums, villages, mountains, whorehouses and busy city streets – hardly a spot of make-up on, a picture of undiluted intensity and rare intuition.

Finally, we got a telephone at home. With it came a directory which I read diligently like a prescribed text for a very important exam, scouring for numbers of my favourite movie stars. While many weren't listed, the one that mattered most fortunately was. And so I'd come back from school, pick up the phone and dial tentatively, my body shivering in nervous anticipation. Obviously she wasn't sitting by the phone waiting for my call and it took many, many failed attempts to finally connect. One boring October afternoon, across a maze of endless copper wiring, via a dull green plastic contraption, I got through to my goddess. With shaky hands I clung to the receiver and in a tentative voice introduced myself as a schoolgirl who liked

her a lot.

For once I couldn't picture her sitting in the house I'd designed for her. This was for real. Here was the subject of my adoration telling me she was happy to hear from me and promising to meet soon after her baby was born a couple of months later. That's all I remember of that three-minute chat (this fact could also be the subject of scrutiny but Smita isn't around to testify). A vital, nay critical part of the tape in my head has been permanently erased, like so many things I wish I could hold on to and access at will. I want that conversation back.

It's the only tangible thing I have of her.

And then I remember 12 December. The evening news and announcement of her getting hospitalized in a critical condition. The little temple in our kitchen stood nailed to the wall and like anyone who'd been raised with the naïve belief that heartfelt prayers fix just about anything, I stood before it, hands folded, head bowed down, tears streaming down my face, begging whoever it was that ran the circus to save her. Then, since we'd booked tickets to watch the late-night show of a new film (and that never fails to lift my spirits), we proceeded to the cinema on the other side of the railway tracks. Outside the cinema hall people were standing around talking of her deteriorating condition. I strained my ears to catch any fragment I could, useless and unreliable as it may have been. We saw the film, a mediocre drama about a woman with a broken leg who gets an artificial foot and becomes a famous dancer.

It took us close to half an hour to walk back home after the show. Later I was to learn this was the exact time she was counting her last breaths. I've spent many long hours over the years trying to be with her through those final moments. To no avail. She was alone. That's how it'll always remain.

My scrapbook filled up very quickly after that. Pictures and reports of the funeral followed. The memory of that bedecked, bloated body impossible to wipe off the disc. Magazine covers and special booklets, personal articles and reminiscences, photographs, television interviews – everyone who was ever touched by her had a story to tell. Like is always the case, nobody has an unkind word about the deceased. I wasn't looking to them to validate her for me. I was a scavenger picking on every word, every line, to see if there was some way I could know her better.

It was impossible to share my loss with anyone. Who would understand the pain of losing a movie star I'd never met? You mourn your loved ones, family, friends, acquaintances even. But not actors who perform tricks on screen to regale you. Even if they were young and talented and beautiful and unique. Even if in your childish, inexplicable way they meant the world to you.

I never prayed after Smita's death.

I kept watching the same films over and over again on television and videocassettes, and later, DVDs. That's all I had of her. They continued to move me to tears. Still do. Sometimes more easily than those closest to me. I look for clues to the person she must have been through the women she played on screen. Was she honest? Compassionate? Loving? Brave? Stubborn? Free-spirited? Loyal? Or whimsical and crazy just like me? I don't know. Never will. But she had within her the power to reach out to me from across a white screen and singe my soul with her fiery eyes.

I saw a replica of those eyes a few years ago. They didn't burn me down. But they did light up the room with their innocence.

Smita is no more. Only her eyes live on.

Excerpts from Jitesh Pillai's annual love letters, 'Last Word', courtesy *Filmfare*

Candle in the Wind

Another feeling hits me as December glides past. Two deep, large, beautiful eyes stare at me from a dusky face. They remind me of what might have been, of what promised to come, and offer a window through which I see images from a short but deep past, of a *Bhumika* that was never fully played out, of a *Chakra* that never came full circle, of an *Aakrosh* on screen that was never completed, a *Manthan* of the world of staid cinema that stopped no sooner than it began.

It has been twenty-one years since I lost Smita Patil to the ways of the unknown. She left behind a legacy so intense, a wake of performances so much larger than life that it would possibly take away from them to put them in words.

In her short and beautiful life, Smita embodied power. Woman power, so well framed for posterity in her final on- screen act in *Mirch Masala*, the audience wondering if their eyes were burning with the intensity of her performance or the chilli powder. So well expressed in the quiet sea of energy that flowed like milk around the landscape of *Manthan*. And it extended into the portrayal of flawed characters, of losing in the face of adversity, of fighting a battle with society and oneself, of challenging norms, posing embarrassing questions to life itself.

Tears line my ducts when I see the twenty-six-year-old Smita play the warden of a women's home in *Umbartha* to plenary perfection …

the haunting sensuality of '*Mee raat taakli*' (*Jait ReJait*) still sears my DVD player. Vignettes of '*Mhaaro gaamkaatha pare*' (*Manthan*) and '*Shamsheer baji na*' (*Bhumika*) are like a whiplash, heartburn that 'Smi' didn't get a fair chance.

Once More with Affection

She single-handedly changed the status of heroines in our films. And I am not just talking about the art arena. Such was her aura that even Amitabh Bachchan, our most commercial of stars, was more than happy to work with her in *Namak Halaal*and *Shakti*. They looked hot together and I always fantasize what would have happened if Yash Chopra had stuck to his original choice and cast her as the wife in *Silsila*.

What is it about her that makes you go back to her movies time and again? I, for one, watch them for the sense of catharsis that ensues. It's admirable how she breaks herself apart, scene after scene, to heal us. It's a wonder how she maintained her mental equilibrium despite battling those emotional storms on screen. Any normal being would have succumbed to the effort but we have always heard reports of her being this jovial person at home, someone who always had a smile at her disposal. And it wasn't a readymade smile that you put on for social graces but a deep-rooted genuine smile that touched her eyes and showcased the warmth of her soul.

Like all geniuses, she used her heart more and her brain less when it came to personal relationships. She seemed destined to shower her affections on the wrong person. She was blind to what others could see so clearly but she didn't let her numerous heartbreaks diminish her ability to love. I cried and cried when she passed away barely two weeks after giving birth to Prateik. She was just thirty-one at that time. A lifetime of glory awaited her but perhaps the gods had other plans…

We will miss you, Smi, forever and always!

Vaishali Chakravarty is a Delhi-based theatre actress, and a drama and performance consultant with Trinity College, London

An Actor Prepares: In Smita's Footsteps

My first introduction to Smita was in Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*(1981) which I watched on Doordarshan as a twelve-year-old in Kolkata. This was nearly a decade after she passed away and up to that point, I

didn't know that she was no more. In fact, it was only later as I developed a keen interest in her work that I started wondering why she wasn't doing more films and was told that she'd died at the young age of thirty-one – which is exactly how old I am now and her passing is even more shocking in this light. Every time I think of having a child I dread that I too might not survive, which, irrational as it sounds, is a measure of my connection with her.

My parents were avid followers of the New Wave and I remember viewing many of those films under their influence. *Sadgati* was based on a Premchand story my father had narrated to me. In the original piece, Dukhi's wife isn't a very prominent character. But Smita made it her own and in some ways anyone watching her started feeling that it was her story. I remember, after watching the film I went into the shower and sat like she does towards the end, crying my heart out trying to feel what she (or her character) would have felt when she finds her beloved's corpse lying in the rain. That was when I thought for the first time that acting could actually be a career option; all you had to do was feel and react!

Perhaps we respond to different things at different ages, so that the first time I watched *Bhumika* (1977) at fourteen, I related instantly to the earlier phase in Usha's life when she's a teenager with two plaits. I used to copy her look in this part of the film and when I saw myself in the mirror I felt that I looked like her. I was thin and darkish with long hair. It was Smita who gave me the confidence to dream of becoming an actress, even though the conventional stereotype of the Hindi film heroine was very different from the way she and I were. I wanted to look like her – I wanted her hair, her eyes, her smell, everything. Erotic as it sounds, I was completely bowled over by her in every possible way.

In that sense, there was a strong identification with the persona on screen and later, when I started working in theatre, there were times when I subconsciously imitated her, especially in a role where I had to play a young widow seeking revenge on the neighbour who has raped her in *The Leela Tapes*. I think there was a dash of vengeance to Smita's best performances. Maybe she was the jealous sort in personal life, or again, I could be projecting myself on her because the idea of revenge is alluring to me. For this particular role, I instinctively used the body language she adopts after leaving Kale's house in *Bhumika*. But I didn't realize what I was doing till my director asked me who I was imitating.

I've always believed that a very thin line separated Smita from her characters. She probably got too involved with the women she was playing on screen, and often I find myself doing the same on stage. Her pensive moments still seem very real, as though she's not acting at

all. There's no mask, such is the overpowering effect of her presence. As if she's working her way into your consciousness, particularly with her intense eyes. In her best moments, I feel as if she's talking directly to me and asking, 'Do you feel what I'm feeling right now?' That kind of immediacy is very rare and although I've always responded very intuitively to cinema and often lived in that world long after watching a good film, I've not idolized anyone so much. To this day, her photograph is my phone's wallpaper.

It must be this emotional connection with her that never allowed me to accept her in commercial cinema. I studiously kept away from films like *Shakti* (1982) and *Aakhir Kyon* (1985) although I thought she held herself quite well through most part of *Namak Halaal* (1982), but the script compromised her in the end.

It was also impossible for me to imagine her with make-up. I never wear make-up on stage – it makes me feel heavy on the face and hampers my performance. When I revisit *Manthan*(1976) or *Mirch Masala* (1987), it doesn't seem like she's used any make-up, which in turn contributes to the authenticity of the acting. In her best work her honesty shines through. And the length of the role doesn't matter. In *Ardh Satya* (1983), she left a mark with such a small role; often, the male characters in her films seemed subdued by her presence.

I watch her films over and over again, and in some films, I sense her absence. Like the women Rekha plays in *Kalyug* (1981) and *Vijeta* (1984), I feel, were tailor-made for Smita. It's as if Rekha has replaced her and is consciously trying to be like her. Similarly, although Rohini Hattangadi is superb in *Saaransh*(1986), I'd have loved to see Smita in that role. Sometimes, I wonder how she would be as an old woman. And what her life would have been like if she hadn't died so suddenly. I saw her son Prateik in *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008) and couldn't take my eyes off him. He's inherited her eyes but perhaps is also paying a price for the aura around her name.

While watching *Bhumika* the other day, in the last scene, where she's lying on the bed and staring at the ceiling, I could transpose myself into the situation and experience the thoughts and emotions she's going through at that moment, both as an actress and an individual.

The identification is complete.

Manoj Kumar is the Chief Executive Officer of Naandi Foundation, and an aficionado of alternate cinema

Being an avid enthusiast of parallel cinema, I grew up watching and absorbing these great films made in the 1970s and '80s. I suspect this genre of films left not just an indelible mark but a certain tension in my inner conscience to search for the meaning of my life itself. And the proverbial messenger could well have been Smita, who essayed some of the finest roles wherein her identity dissolved into the character she portrayed. Maybe this is why I chucked a stable development banking career to work for the last two decades with the poorest and most marginalized communities in India.

I will particularly single out two of her films: *Chidambaram* and *Manthan*. In both, Smita essays the indefatigable spirit of the unrecognized underprivileged women of rural India. Both are about churning. While in *Chidambaram* it's the stirring of the human soul caused by purgatory guilt, in *Manthan*, it is churning of the collective minds of a rural exploited community.

Smita plays pivotal roles to anchor the messages. It is her personal conviction of wanting to uplift the living conditions of the poor she so empathized with that renders the characters believable. Through her performance, she not only does justice to the legendary directors G. Aravindan and Shyam Benegal, but also transforms the viewer. It is for this very reason that I propose to show (with appropriate subtitles) *Manthan* to two small farmers' cooperative my NGO works with. One comprises Adivasis living in the Eastern Ghats whose epicentre is a valley called Araku. The 10,000-odd farmers' cooperative growing coffee is scripting a success story similar to the one in Manthan. The other is a new initiative we began with 1,000 farmers in Wardha, Maharashtra, who have begun their journey to emulate Araku.

Smita, it appears, knew she had to hurry. She sifted through her roles with consummate ease, fuelled by her natural passion to represent women whose condition she yearned to change for the better. If I continue to be mesmerized by her beauty it is because she has the rare quality of being able to project an inner beauty that makes her seem so real on screen. Through the medium of cinema she held up for humanity to see the inner beauty of women.

Friends mourn her death and celebrate her life. Lalita Tamhane conceptualized, scripted and staged a show dedicated to Smita: *Murtimanta Asmita*. It is an audio-visual show where Sonali Kulkarni

and Sachin Khedekar, heavyweights of Marathi cinema, narrate highlights of Smita's life. The narration is interspersed with clips of her films, recorded interviews with directors and co-stars. Live renditions by noted singers of songs from Smita's films take us on a trip into musical nostalgia. Asha Bhosle recorded the specially composed theme song for the show. Asha- ji was so overcome by emotion during the first show in 1989 that she left halfway. Smita's parents were present at the well- attended premier. The coffee table edition of Tamhane's book *Smita, Smit Anee Mee,* was released on the occasion. It is an expensive show to mount. These ardent fans of Smita took *Murtimant Asmita* to the US.

Should we count the ways in which we cherish the memory of this incomparable woman? Images and memories surge into life as we see her films again, talk to people close to her. It feels as if it was only yesterday, but time does not stand still for anyone.

Smita defined the new Indian woman for so many of us, women and men. She redefined our idea of beauty ever so subtly and sensuously. She is up there with Nargis and Meena Kumari in the pantheon of actors. I would personally place her above them because she was untouched by film industry baggage of stereotypes, expectations and practised feminine airs and graces they were asked to adopt. So many of the great actresses had just a couple of defining roles that enshrined them in film history. Nargis for *Awara* and *Mother India.* Meena Kumari for *Pakeezah* and *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*. Waheeda Rehman for *Guide, Pyaasa* and *Kaagaz ke Phool*. Nutan for *Bandini* and *Sujata*. Shabana for *Arth, Mandi, Khandhar, Masoom* and *Godmother*. Smita's Dasavatars outnumber all of them. Not just in quantity but the sheer power of Smita's core strengths – searing intensity, soul-stirring sincerity and passion that come in many hues and limn each nuance with every fibre of her being.

Yes, by just being Smita.

*_Satyajit Ray_: _The Inner Eye,_ p. 258.

**This is an edited version of the cover story Rauf Ahmed did for *Filmfare* in December 1986, when he was editor. This was for *Screen* on Smita's birth anniversary in October 2008.

Afterword

Dear Mrs Patil,

I came across this very beautiful poem by Jalaluddin Rumi, a Persian poet from the thirteenth century. And I was reminded of Smita. It gave me great solace. Perhaps, it might do the same for you.

I died mineral
and turned plant.
Died a plant
to turn sentient.
Died a beast
to wear human clothes.
So when by dying
did I grow less?
Again from manhood
I must die,
and once again
released,
Soar through the sky
And here as well
I must lose place.
Everything passes,
but His face.

My regards to Mr Patil, Manya and yourself, and also to your little grandson.

Sincerely,
Shyam Benegal

Shyam Benegal

103 Sangam
G.Deshmukh Marg
Bombay 400 026

28/1/87

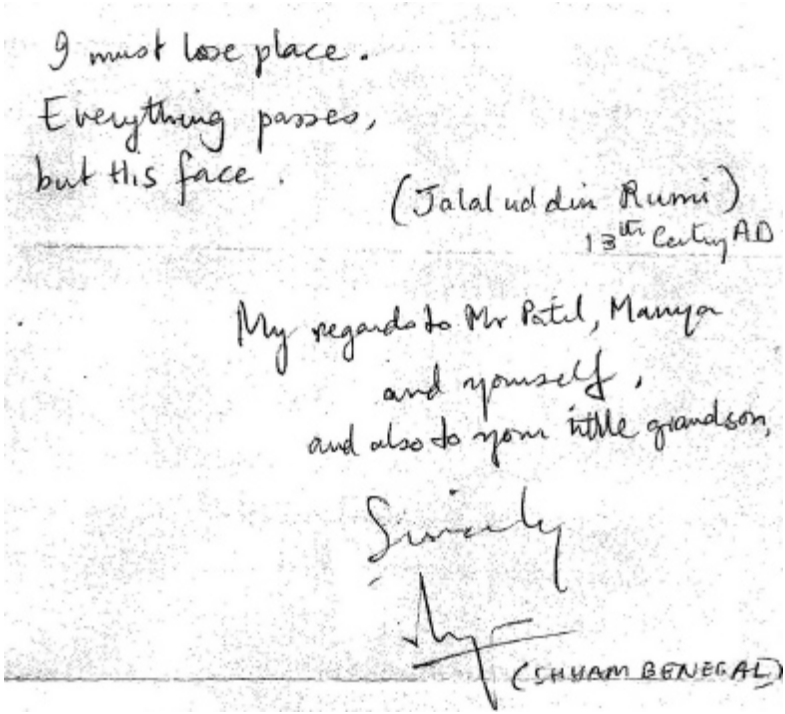
Mrs Shivaji Rao Patil.

Dear Mrs Patil,

I came across this very beautiful poem by Jalal ud din Rumi, a persian poet from the 13th century and I was reminded of Smita. It gave me great solace. Perhaps, it might do the same for you.

I died mineral
and turned plant
Died a plant
to turn sentient
Died a beast
to wear human clothes
So when by dying
did I grow less?
Again from manhood
I must die,
and once again
released,
Soar through the sky
And here as well

PTO.


I must lose place.
Everything passes,
but this face.
(Jalal ud din Rumi)
13th Century AD

My regards to Mr Patil, Manya
and yourself,
and also to your little grandson,

Sincerely

(SHYAM BENEGAL)

This is a handwritten letter Shyam Benegal wrote to Mrs Vidya Patil on 28 January 1987.

The recipient of this thoughtful letter passed away on 7 March 2015. Vidyatai's family, friends, many admirers and all those who were touched by her sincerity and empathy might find solace in the profound words written so many centuries ago. She was not just the mother who was such a towering role model for her daughters. She was a woman who accomplished so much in her own right with underplayed grace and inspirational commitment to the cause of women and children and their education. Vidya Patil was cremated in Shirpur, near the high school established in Smita Patil's name. Vidyatai kept Smita's memory alive with painstaking diligence and astonishing generosity, freely sharing not only memories but personal letters.

Filmography

1974

Teevra Madhyam (FTII diploma film)
Director: Arun Khopkar; *Cinematographyr*: Raymond Wong; *Editor*: Premanand Kamble; *Screenplay*: Arun Khopkar; *Music*: Conceived by Arun Khopkar, with the generous and kind cooperation of Pt. Kumar Gandharva; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Chinnu Patwardhan

Raja Shiv Chhatrapati (Marathi)
Director: Chandravadan; *Screenplay*: Pradeep Dixit; *Music*: Vasant Desai; *Cast*: Shriram Gojamgunde, Sumati Gupte, Smita Patil, Anupama, Kanan Kaushal, Veena, Bharat Kapoor, Chandrashekhar, Iftekar, Shrikant Moghe

1975

Charandas Chor (Hindi)
Director: Shyam Benegal; *Screenplay*: Shama Zaidi, Habib Tanvir, based on Vijaydan Detha's Rajasthani folk tale; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Anant Apte; *Music*: Nand Kishore Mittal; *Cast*: Habib Tanvir, Madanlal, Lalu Ram, Smita Patil

Samna (Marathi)
Director: Jabbar Patel; *Screenplay*: Vijay Tendulkar, Jabbar Patel; *Cinematography*: Suryakant Lavande; *Editor*: N.S. Ved; *Music*: Bhaskar Chandavarkar; *Cast*: Nilu Phule, Dr Shriram Lagu, Mohan Agashe, Smita Patil

Nishant (Hindi)
Director: Shyam Benegal; *Screenplay*: Vijay Tendulkar, Satyadev Dubey; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Bhanudas Divakar; *Music*: Vanraj Bhatia; *Cast*: Girish Karnad, Amrish Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Mohan Agashe, Anant Nag, Satyadev Dubey

1976

Manthan (Hindi)
Director: Shyam Benegal; *Screenplay*: Vijay Tendulkar from a story by Shyam Benegal, Dr Verghese Kurien; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Bhanudas; *Music*: Vanraj Bhatia; *Cast*: Girish Karnad, Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Mohan Agashe, Amrish Puri, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Anant Nag

1977

Bhumika (Hindi)
Director: Shyam Benegal; *Screenplay*: Girish Karnad, Satyadev Dubey, Shyam Benegal, based on *Sangte Aika* by Hansa Wadkar; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Bhanudas; *Music*: Vanraj Bhatia; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Amol Palekar, Naseeruddin Shah, Anant Nag, Sulabha Deshpande, Amrish Puri, Baby Ruksana

Kondura (Hindi)/**Anugraham** (Telugu)
Director: Shyam Benegal; *Screenplay*: Arudra, Girish Karnad adapted from C.T. Khanolkar's Marathi novel *Kondura*; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Bhanudas; *Music*: Vanraj Bhatia; *Cast*: Anant Nag, Vanisree, Smita Patil, Amrish Puri, Shekhar Chatterjee, Satyadev Dubey

Jait Re Jait (Marathi)
Director: Jabbar Patel; *Screenplay*: Satish Alekar based on G.N. Dandekar's novel *Thakurwadi*; *Cinematography*: Binod Pradhan; *Editor*: N.S. Vaidya; *Music*: Pandit Hridaynath Mangeshkar; *Cast*: Mohan Agashe, Smita Patil, Nilu Phule, Sulabha Deshpande, Seema

1978

Gaman (Hindi)
Director: Muzaffar Ali; *Screenplay*: Hriday Lani; *Cinematography*: Nadeem Khan; *Editor*: Jethu Mundul; *Music*: Jaidev; *Cast*: Farooque Sheikh, Smita Patil, Jalal Agha, Gita Sidharth

Sarvasakshi (Marathi)
Director: Ramdas Phutane; *Screenplay*: Bhaskar and Meera

Chandavarkar; *Cinematography*: Sharad Navle; *Editor*: N.S. Vaidya; *Music*: Bhaskar Chandavarkar; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Jairam Hardikar, Anjali Paigankar

1980

Naxalites (Hindi)
Director: K.A. Abbas; *Screenplay*: K.A. Abbas based on his novel *TheNaxalites*; *Cinematography*: S. Ramachandra; *Editor*: Mohan Rathod; *Music*: Prem Dhawan; *Cast*: Mithun Chakraborty, Smita Patil, Dina Pathak, Jalal Agha, Imtiaz, Nana Palsikar, Bijaya Jena

Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai (Hindi)
Director: Saeed Mirza; *Screenplay*: Saeed Mirza, Kundan Shah; *Cinematography*: Virendra Saini; *Editor*: Renu Saluja; *Music*: Bhaskar Chandavarkar, Manas Mukherjee; *Cast*: Naseeruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Dilip Dhawan, Om Puri, Arrvind Deshpande, Sulabha Deshpande

Bhavni Bhavai (Gujarati)/**Andher Nagri** (Hindi)
Director: Ketan Mehta; *Screenplay*: Ketan Mehta, Hriday Lani; *Cinematography*: 'Pummy'; *Editor*: Ramesh Asher; *Music*: Gaurang Vyas; *Cast*: Naseeruddin Shah, Smita Patil, Om Puri, Dina Pathak, Mohan Gokhale, Suhasini Mulay, Benjamin Gilani

1981

Chakra (Hindi)
Director: Rabindra Dharmaraj; *Screenplay*: Rabindra Dharmaraj, based on Jaywant Dalvi's novel; *Cinematography*: Barun Mukherjee; *Editor*: Bhanudas; *Music*: Hridaynath Mangeshkar; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Ranjit Chowdhury, Rohini Hattangadi, Anjali Paigankar

Aakrosh (Hindi)
Director: Govind Nihalani; *Screenplay*: Vijay Tendulkar, Satyadev Dubey; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Keshav Naidu; *Music*: Ajit Verman; *Cast*: Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Smita Patil, Amrish Puri

Akaler Sandhane (Bengali)
Director: Mrinal Sen; *Screenplay*: Mrinal Sen from a story by Amalendu

Chakraborty; *Cinematography*: K.K. Mahajan; *Editor*: Gangadhar Naskar; *Music*: Salil Chowdhury; *Cast*: Dhritiman Chaterji, Smita Patil, Sreela Majumdar, Rajen Tarafdar

1981

Sadgati (TV film)
Director: Satyajit Ray; *Screenplay*: Satyajit Ray based on Munshi Premchand's story; *Cinematography*: Soumendu Roy; *Editor*: Dulal Dutta; *Music*: Satyajit Ray; *Cast*: Om Puri, Mohan Agashe, Smita Patil, Gita Sidharth, Richa Mishra

Umbartha (Marathi)/**Subah** (Hindi)
Director: Jabbar Patel; *Screenplay*: Vijay Tendulkar based on Shanta Nisal's novel *Beghar*; *Cinematography*: Rajan Kinagi; *Editor*: N.S. Vaidya; *Music*: Hridaynath Mangeshkar; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Girish Karnad, Shrikant Moghe, Ashalata, Kusum Kulkarni

1982

Arth (Hindi)
Director: Mahesh Bhatt; *Screenplay*: Mahesh Bhatt, Sujit Sen; *Cinematography*: Pravin Bhatt; *Editor*: Keshav Hirani; *Music*: Jagjit Singh, Chitra Singh; *Cast*: Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Rohini Hattangadi, Raj Kiran, Sidharth Kak, Gita Sidharth

Shakti (Hindi)
Director: Ramesh Sippy; *Screenplay*: Salim-Javed; *Cinematography*: S.M. Anwar; *Editor*: M.S. Shinde; *Music*: Rahul Dev Burman; *Cast*: Dilip Kumar, Rakhee, Amitabh Bachchan, Smita Patil, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Amrish Puri

Namak Halaal (Hindi)
Director: Praksh Mehra; *Music*: Bappi Lahiri; *Cast*: Waheeda Rehman, Amitabh Bachchan, Shashi Kapoor, Smita Patil, Parveen Babi, Om Prakash, Ranjit

Badle Ki Aag (Hindi)
Director: Raj Kumar Kohli; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Sunil Dutt, Dharmendra, Jeetendra, Reena Roy, Smita Patil, Nirupa Roy, Kader Khan, Sarika

Bazaar (Hindi)
Director: Sagar Sarhadi; *Screenplay*: Sagar Sarhadi; *Cinematography*: Ishan Arya; *Editor*: S. Chakraborty; *Music*: Khayyam; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Farooque Sheikh, Bharat Kapoor, Supriya Pathak, Shaukat Azmi, Sulabha Deshpande

Tazurba (Hindi)
Director: Nikhil Saini; *Screenplay*: Nikhil Saini; *Music*: Usha Khanna; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Raj Babbar, Mazhar Khan, Shakti Kapoor

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1983

Mera Dost Mera Dushman (Hindi)
Director: Raj Khosla; *Screenplay*: Suraj Sanim; *Cinematography*: Pratap Sinha; *Editor*: Waman Bhonsle, Gurudutt Shirali; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Shatrughan Sinha, Smita Patil, Sanjeev Kumar, Danny Denzongpa

Dard Ka Rishta (Hindi)
Director: Sunil Dutt; *Screenplay*: Bharat B. Bhalla; *Cinematography*: Ramchandra; *Editor*: Waman Bhonsle, Gurudutt Shirali; *Music*: Rahul Dev Burman; *Cast*: Ashok Kumar, Sunil Dutt, Reena Roy, Smita Patil, Baby Khushboo

Mandi (Hindi)
Director: Shyam Benegal; *Screenplay*: Shama Zaidi, Shyam Benegal; *Cinematography*: Ashok Mehta; *Editor*: Bhanudas Divakar; *Music*: Vanraj Bhatia; *Cast*: Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Saeed Jaffrey, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Om Puri, Neena Gupta, Soni Razdan, Aditya Bhattacharya

Ardh Satya (Hindi)
Director: Govind Nihalani; *Screenplay*: Vijay Tendulkar; *Cinematography*: Govind Nihalani; *Editor*: Renu Saluja; *Music*: Ajit Verman; *Cast*: Om Puri, Smita Patil, Amrish Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, Sadashiv Amrapurkar, Shafi Inamdar

Qayamat (Hindi)
Director: Raj N. Sippy; *Screenplay*: Pari Kapoor, Mohan Kaul; *Cinematography*: Anwar Siraj; *Editor*: Waman Bhosle, Gurudutt Shirali; *Music*: Rahul Dev Burman; *Cast*: Dharmendra, Smita Patil, Shatrughan Sinha, Jaya Prada, Shakti Kapoor, Poonam Dhillon

Bheegi Palkein (Hindi)
Director: Sisir Mishra; *Screenplay*: Sisir Mishra, Kartik Rath; *Cinematography*: Dileep Dutta; *Editor*: Sudhakar Naik; *Music*: Jugal Kishore, Tilak Raj; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Raj Babbar, Sulabha Deshpande, Dina Pathak, Nandita Thakur, Leela Mishra, Jagdeep

Chatpatee (Hindi)
Director: N. Ravindra; *Screenplay*: Nirupama based on a story by Sushma Shiromani; *Cinematography*: S.N. Dubey; *Editor*: Chandrakant Malekar; *Music*: Basu-Manohari (Basu Deo Chakraborty, Manohari Singh); *Cast*: Dr Shriram Lagu, Smita Patil, Raj Kiran, Seema Deo, Reema Lagoo, Sudhir Dalvi

Kanch Ki Deewar (Hindi)
Director: Y.N. Yasin; *Screenplay*: Meraj Ansari; *Cinematography*: Anand V. Gadnis; *Editor*: Yakub Khan; *Music*: Shankar Jaikishan; *Cast*: Sanjeev Kumar, Smita Patil, Shakti Kapoor, Amrish Puri, Rajan Sippy, Om Prakash

Ghulami (Hindi)
Director: J.P. Dutta; *Screenplay*: O.P. Dutta; *Cinematography*: Ishwar Bidri; *Editor*: Deepak Wirkud, M.D. Worlikar; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Dharmendra, Mithun Chakraborty, Naseeruddin Shah, Reena Roy, Smita Patil, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Anita Raj, Raza Murad

Anveshane (Kannada)
Director: T.S. Nagabharana; *Screenplay*: T.S. Nagabharana, Girish Karnad; *Cinematography*: S. Ramachandra; *Editor*: J. Stanley; *Music*: Vijaya Bhaskar; *Cast*: Anant Nag, Smita Patil, Girish Karnad, Sundar Raj, G.V.Shivanand

Ghungroo (Hindi)
Director: Ram Sethi; *Screenplay*: Prakash Mehra; *Cinematography*: N. Satyen; *Editor*: Jayant, Shyam, Mangesh; *Music*: Kalyanji Anandji; *Cast*: Shashi Kapoor, Waheeda Rehman, Smita Patil, Suresh Oberoi, Kunal Goswami, Ranjeet

Haadsa (Hindi)
Director: Akbar Khan; *Screenplay*: Sagar Sarhadi; *Cinematography*: Pramod Moutho; *Editor*: Sunil; *Music*: Kalyanji Anandji; *Cast*: Akbar Khan, Ranjeeta Kaur, Smita Patil, Ashok Kumar, Amrish Puri, Iftekar, Naseeruddin Shah

1984

Aaj Ki Awaaz (Hindi)
Director: Ravi Chopra; *Screenplay*: Shabd Kumar; *Cinematography*: Barun Mukherjee; *Editor*: S.B. Mane; *Music*: Ravi; *Cast*: Raj Babbar, Smita Patil, Nana Patekar, Iftekar, Shafi Inamdar, Om Shivpuri, Chandrashekhar, Urmila Bhatt, Dalip Tahil

Farishta (Hindi)
Director: Sunil Sikand; *Screenplay*: Gyandev Agnihotri, Tapan Chakraborty, Sunil Sikand; *Cinematography*: V. Durgaprasad; *Editor*: David Dhawan; *Music*: Rahul Dev Burman; *Cast*: Ashok Kumar, Pran, Smita Patil, Kanwaljit Singh, Danny Denzongpa

Tarang (Hindi)
Director: Kumar Shahani; *Screenplay*: Kumar Shahani, Roshan Shahani; *Cinematography*: K.K. Mahajan; *Editor*: Ashok Thyagi; *Music*: Vanraj Bhatia; **Cast**: Amol Palekar, Smita Patil, Kawal Gandhiok, Dr Shriram Lagu, Girish Karnad, M.K. Raina, Rohini Hattangadi, Om Puri, Arvind Deshpande, Sulabha Deshpande

Pet, Pyar Aur Paap (Hindi)
Director: Durai; *Screenplay*: Durai; *Cinematography*: V. Manohar; *Editor*: Vellaiswamy; *Music*: Bappi Lahiri; Cast: Smita Patil, Raj Babbar, Tanuja, Aruna Irani, Amjad Khan, Moushmi Chatterjee, Sulabha Deshpande, and Amitabh Bachchan as himself

Giddh (Hindi)
Director: T.S. Ranga; *Screenplay*: T.S. Ranga; *Cinematography*: Ko Hung Chiang; *Editor*: Aruna-Vikas; *Music*: B.V. Karanth; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Om Puri, Nana Patekar, Gopi Desai, Madhuri Purandare, Achyut Potdar

Shapath (Hindi)
Director: Ravikant Nagaich; *Cinematography*: S. Suresh; *Editor*: C.J. Murali, J. Ramiah; *Music*: Bappi Lahiri; *Cast*: Raj Babbar, Smita Patil, Ranjeet, Shakti Kapoor, Kader Khan

Anand Aur Anand (Hindi)
Director: Dev Anand; *Screenplay*: Suraj Sanim; *Cinematography*: D.K. Prabhakar; *Music*: Rahul Dev Burman; *Cast*: Dev Anand, Rakhee Gulzar, Smita Patil, Raj Babbar, Introducing Snueil Anand

Raavan (Hindi)
Director: Johny Bakshi; *Screenplay*: Raj Bharti; *Cinematography*: Pravin Bhatt; *Editor*: T.M. Sundar, Dilip Kotalji; *Music*: Jagjit Singh; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Vikram, Gulshan Arora, Om Puri, Ketan Anand, Vikas Anand

Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki (Hindi)
Director: B. Subhash; *Screenplay*: Ram Kelkar from story by B. Subhash; *Cinematography*: Nadeem Khan; *Editor*: Mangesh Chavan, Shyam Gupte; *Music*: Bappi Lahiri; *Cast*: Mithun Chakraborty, Smita Patil, Amrish Puri, Salma Agha

1985

Chidambaram (Malayalam)
Director: G. Aravindan; *Screenplay*: G. Aravindan based on a short story by C.V. Sreeraman; *Cinematography*: Shaji N. Karun *Editor*: K.R. Bose; *Music*: Paravur Devarajan; *Cast*: Gopi, Smita Patil, Sreenivasan, Mohanlal as himself, Innocent Vareed Thekketala as himself, Nedumudi Venu as himself

Jawaab (Hindi)
Director: Ravi Tandon; *Screenplay*: Shabd Kumar; *Cinematography*: K.K. Mahajan; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Raj Babbar, Master Bittoo, Abhi Bhattacharya

Aakhir Kyon (Hindi)
Director: J. Om Prakash; *Screenplay*: Dr Achla Nagar; *Cinematography*: K.C. Raja; *Editor*: Nand Kumar; *Music*: Rajesh Roshan; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Rajesh Khanna, Tina Munim, Raakesh Roshan

Situm (Hindi)
Director: Aruna-Vikas; *Screenplay*: Vikas Desai, Aruna Raje from a story by Vikram; *Cinematography*: Barun Mukherjee; *Editor*: Aruna- Vikas; *Music*: Chitra Singh, Jagjit Singh; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Vikram, Sulabha Deshpande, Keith Stevenson, Arun Sarnaik

Meraa Ghar Mere Bachhe (Hindi)
Director: Chandar Vohra; *Screenplay*: Jainendra K. Jain; *Cinematography*: A.K. Bir; *Editor*: A. Sanjeevi; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Raj Babbar, Meenakshi Seshadri, Vijayendra Ghatge, Sushma Seth

Abhinetri (Hindi, TV series, *Satyajit Ray Presents*)
Director: Sandip Ray; *Screenplay*: Satyajit Ray based on a short story by Narendranath Mitra; *Cinematography*: Barun Raha; *Editor*: Dulal Dutta; *Music*: Satyajit Ray; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Annu Kapoor, Vishwaguha Thakurta

Aap Ke Saath (Hindi)
Director: J. Om Prakash; *Screenplay*: Sachin Bhowmik; *Cinematography*: V. Babasaheb; *Editor*: Nand Kumar; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Anil Kapoor, Vinod Mehra, Rati Agnihotri, Amrish Puri

Mirch Masala (Hindi)
Director: Ketan Mehta; *Screenplay*: Ketan Mehta; *Cinematography*: Jahangir Chowdhury; *Editor*: Sanjiv Shah; *Music*: Rajat Dholakia; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Suresh Oberoi, Om Puri, Deepti Naval, Raj Babbar, Benjamin Gilani, Dina Pathak, Ratna Pathak, Supriya Pathak

Debshishu (Hindi)
Director: Utpalendu Chakrabarty; *Screenplay*: Utpalendu Chakrabarty; *Cinematography*: Soumendu Roy; *Editor*: Bulu Ghosh; *Music*: Utpalendu Chakrabarty; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Sadhu Meher, Rohini Hattangadi, Om Puri, Shyamanand Jalan, Sushaant Sanyal

Sutradhar (Hindi)
Director: Chandrakant Joshi; *Screenplay*: Vijay Kuvalekar; *Cinematography*: Debu Deodhar; *Editor*: Ashok Patwardhan; *Music*: Sudhir Moghe; *Cast*: Nana Patekar, Smita Patil, Girish Karnad, Nilu Phule, Gajanan Jagirdar, Madhu Kambikar

Angaaray (Hindi)
Director: Rajesh Sethi; *Screenplay*: Salim Khan; *Cinematography*: Ravi Kiran; *Editor*: Dilip Kotalgi, Zafar Sultan; *Music*: Annu Malik; *Cast*: Raj Babbar, Smita Patil, Nirupa Roy, Iftekar, Ranjit, Rajesh Khanna (special appearance), Bindu

Amrit (Hindi)
Director: Mohan Kumar; Screenplay: Mohan Kumar; *Cinematography*: K.K. Mahajan; *Editor*: Pratap Bhatt; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Rajesh Khanna, Smita Patil, Anita Kanwar, Shafi Inamdar, Aruna Irani, Satish Shah, Zarina Wahab

Dilwaala (Hindi)
Director: K. Murli Manohar Rao; Screenplay: Parachuri Brothers; *Cinematography*: S.Gopal Reddy; *Editor*: K.A. Marthand; *Music*: Bappi Lahiri; *Cast*: Mithun Chakraborty, Smita Patil, Meenakshi Seswhadri, Kader Khan, Aruna Irani, Asrani

Dahleez (Hindi)
Director: Ravi Chopra; *Screenplay*: Satish Bhatnagar, Dr Rahi Masoom Reza; *Cinematography*: Dharam Chopra; *Editor*: S.B. Mane; *Music*: Ravi; *Cast*: Raj Babbar, Jackie Shroff, Meenakshi Seshadri, Smita Patil (special appearance)

Anokha Rishta (Hindi)
Director: I.V. Sasi; *Screenplay*: Dr.Rahi Masoom Reza from a story by P. Padmarajan; *Cinematography*: Vasant Kumar; *Editor*: K. Narayanan; *Music*: Rahul Dev Burman; *Cast*: Rajesh Khanna, Smita Patil, Sabia, Tanuja, Shafi Inamdar

Teesra Kinara (Hindi)
Director: Krishna Kant; *Screenplay*: Kamleshwar; *Cinematography*: Nando Bhattacharya; *Editor*: S.T. Koorani, Hussain Burmawala; *Music*: Jagdish Khanna, Shyam Sagar, Uttam Singh; *Cast*: Raj Babbar, Smita Patil, Anita Raaj, Manmohan Krishna, Paintal, Javed Khan

1987

Nazrana (Hindi)
Director Ravi Tandon; *Screenplay*: Vijay Kaul from story by Gulshan Nanda; *Cinematography*: Alok Das Gupta; *Editor*: Waman Bhosle, Gurudutt Shirali; *Music*: Laxmikant Pyarelal; *Cast*: Rajesh Khanna, Smita Patil, Sridevi, Abhi Bhattacharya, Preeti Sapru, Iftekar

Awam (Hindi)
Director: B.R. Chopra; *Screenplay*: Dr Rahi Masoom Reza; *Cinematography*: Dharam Chopra; *Editor*: S.B. Mane; *Music*: Ravi; *Cast*: Rajesh Khanna, Ashok Kumar, Raj Babbar, Smita Patil, Chandrashekhar, Iftekar

Dance Dance (Hindi)
Director: B. Subhash; *Screenplay*: B. Subhash; *Cinematography*: Radhu Karmakar; *Editor*: Mangesh V. Chavan; *Music*: Bappi Lahiri; *Cast*: Mithun Chakraborty, Smita Patil, Mandakini, Amrish Puri, Shakti

Kapoor, Dalip Tahil, Om Shivpuri

Thikana
Director: Mahesh Bhatt; *Screenplay*: Suraj Sanim; *Cinematography*: Adeep Tandon; *Editor*: Tara Singh; *Music*: Kalyanji Anandji; *Cast*: Anil Kapoor, Smita Patil, Rohini Hattangadi, Amrita Singh, Suresh Oberoi

Raahee (Hindi)
Director: Raman Kumar; *Screenplay*: Charandas Shokh; *Cinematography*: Sunil Sharma; *Editor*: David Dhawan; *Music*: Chitra Singh, Jagjit Singh; *Cast*: Sanjeev Kumar, Shatrughan Sinha, Smita Patil, Ranjeet, Om Prakash, Dina Pathak, Manmohan Krishna

Galiyon Ka Badshah (Hindi)
Director: Sher Jung Singh; *Screenplay*: S. Morarjee; *Cinematography*: R.D. Mathur; *Editor*: Nand Kumar; *Music*: Kalyanji Anandji; *Cast*: Raaj Kumar, Hema Malini, Mithun Chakraborty, Smita Patil, Danny Denzongpa, Poonam Dhillon, Dr Shriram Lagu, Om Shivpuri

1988

Waaris (Hindi)
Director: Raveendra Peepat; *Screenplay*: Baldev Gill based on the novel *Kaare Haathi* by Sohan Singh Hans; *Cinematography*: Manmohan Singh; *Editor*: Subhash Sehgal; *Music*: Jagdish Khanna, Uttam Singh; *Cast*: Smita Patil, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Raj Babbar, Amrita Singh, Amrish Puri, Raj Kiran

Tere Sheher Mein (1986) was scripted and directed by Sagar Sarhadi with Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah, Deepti Naval and Marc Zuber. It was never released. The negative mysteriously was shifted from Film Centre in Bombay to Madras and nobody knows where it is. The financier vanished. Smita was very pleased with the film when she saw it previewed – she saw it as *her* film despite initial reservations. The film was shot by A.K. Bir and had music by Khayyam.

Ashwamedher Ghora (Bengali and Hindi) was abandoned after one schedule of shooting in Calcutta. The director was Shankar Bhattacharjee and the lead pair was Amol Palekar and Smita Patil.

The cavalier attitude of mainstream cinema to credit titles is astonishing. The editor is the first casualty, sometimes the cinematographer. Even Navketan, noted for its professionalism, omits

the editor in the credits of *Anand and Anand*. *Badle Ki Aag* dispenses even with the cinematographer's name. As for *Namak Halaal*, there are no credit titles other than producer, director and music director. Not even the stellar cast! No details of *Raja Shiv Chhatrapati*, Smita Patil's first Marathi film, are available.

Acknowledgements

So many people have helped in so many ways in writing this book that a mere thank you is not enough.

First of all, Smita Patil's family, her sister Dr Anita-Patil Deshmukh in particular, her mother the late Mrs Vidya Patil, her father Mr Shivajirao Patil have been extremely generous with their memories, photographs and letters. I am forever indebted to them for their warmth and trust. Adeet, Smita's nephew, spoke from the heart about his childhood memories of his beloved Mityama. Smita's soul sisters, Jhelum Paranjape and Aruna Raje Patil, spoke with the frankness that intimacy bestows, as did lifelong friends Subhash Awchat, Sumita Naren, Mohan Agashe and Ravi Deshpande.

Film-makers Shyam Benegal, Jabbar Patel and Arun Khopkar offered insights into Smita the actor and remarkable woman with acuity and warmth of long association. The other directors who made significant films with Smita – Kumar Shahani, Ketan Mehta, Govind Nihalani, Mahesh Bhatt, Sagar Sarhadi, Saeed Mirza, Ramesh Sippy, T.S. Ranga, K. Nagabharana – gave their time willingly to an importunate writer demanding to know all they could tell her. Ranga and Nagabharana, Bangalore- based directors, sent me DVDs of their films. Hitendra Ghosh, the sound recordist, was both an old friend and colleague who agreed to meet me just after he recovered from surgery. Paddy (Padmanabhan) was the other sound expert who had nuggets of information to share as did film-maker Amole Gupte. Sandip Ray was approachable over the phone to speak of his father Satyajit Ray's experience of working with Smita. A last-minute contact, courtesy Anita, was Smita's personal make-up artist Deepak Sawant who was near to tears as he spoke of his association with Smita when she entered mainstream cinema. As for her fellow actors, Shabana Azmi, Om Puri, Deepti Naval and Amol Palekar, they reminisced freely of a colleague who was part of their own journey through landmark films of our *other* cinema. Dhritiman Chaterji was punctilious to set the time and date for a telephonic conversation, even though I had never met him, and had wonderful insights into the making of one of Smita's best films. Nandita Das took time out to write a brief but moving account of her personal equation with a Smita she had never met. Deepti Naval permitted me to use her poem 'Smita and I'.

As for the journalist fraternity, I can say they are tremendously helpful in big and small ways – from sharing telephone numbers to getting hold of old films. Sanjit Narvekar not only got me copies of

films but downloaded a few at a moment's notice. Praba Mahajan, wife of the ace cinematographer K.K. Mahajan, forwarded links to clips of songs, scenes and interviews. Veteran Piroj Wadia shared old interviews while Bhawana Somaaya gave glimpses of a rookie's first interaction with the star in the making and so many details of later incidents. Bharathi Pradhan was willing to go on record with her less than adulatory opinion. Deepa Gahlot was open to sharing an unfortunate incident involving Smita. Lalita Tamhane gave me carte blanche to excerpt recorded interviews from her audio-visual tribute to Smita, *Murtimant Asmita*. Rekha Deshpande was another journalist close to Smita and she told me interesting on-location stories.

My one-time editor at *Screen* and *Zee Premier*, Rauf Ahmed, was willing to talk anytime and let me use the finest article that came out after Smita's death. Jitesh Pillai, editor of *Filmfare*, chose two of his favourite tributes to Smita that are featured in the final chapter. Deepa Deosthalee readily agreed to let me reproduce her article that is from the heart of an adoring young fan now matured into a fine critic. She not only found Vaishali Chakraborty, a thinking stage actor who was deeply influenced by Smita, but also interviewed her for the book. I was fortunate to have friends like Rinki Bhattacharya who knew Smita during her last years and remembered that her film-maker–photographer son Aditya Bhattacharya shot some wonderful pictures of Smita. I am grateful to Dileep Padgaonkar who did not know me personally but talked freely because I knew his wife Latika.

I have to thank Anita again for leading me to Prof. Kirti Trivedi, of IIT Bombay, who helped organize an exhibition of Smita's work as a photographer. He shed light on a totally new side of the multi-talented Smita. Subhash Chedha, engaged in the painstaking work of preserving photographs, film publications and other archival material, scanned photographs given by Anita and gave some from his own collection free of cost.

I would have been lost but for the tech support of my husband Shyam when the computer threatened to pack off. Thanks to my agent Kanishka Gupta for his positive feedback and my editor Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri for the precision of his comments and suggestions that brought clarity to my mind.

I must thank Shyam Benegal one last time for writing the foreword to this book. Fittingly, a letter he wrote to Smita's mother forms the appropriate afterword.

Photographs

Smita with parents and older sister Anita

Anita (extreme left), Anju (second from left), Jhelum and Smita (second from right) in a dance drama *Azadi Ki Jung*

L to R: Smita, Jhelum, Anju doing the Bihu dance during their Bharat Darshan tour

The iconic moment in *Bhumika*

Playing herself in *Akaler Sandhane*

Manthan's feisty Bindu

Amma in *Chakra* with Anna played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda

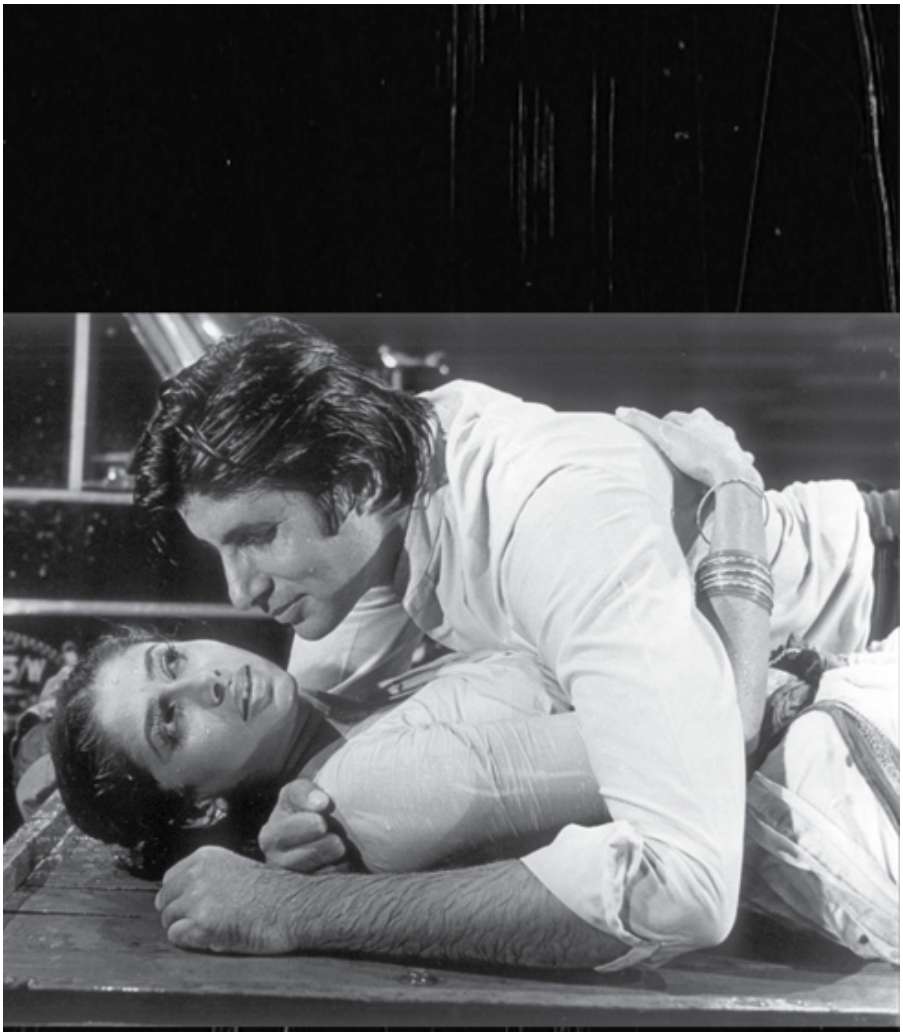
Weeping over marital discord in *Bheegi Palkein*

Dressed up in Maharashtrian style for a Doordarshan event in Pune

Janaki, the mother courage of *Tarang*; the baby in her arms is her beloved nephew Adeet

Showing off her mehendi in *Bazaar*

Start of a troubled journey to the city in *Teesra Kinara*



The in'-famous rain song of *Namak Halaal*

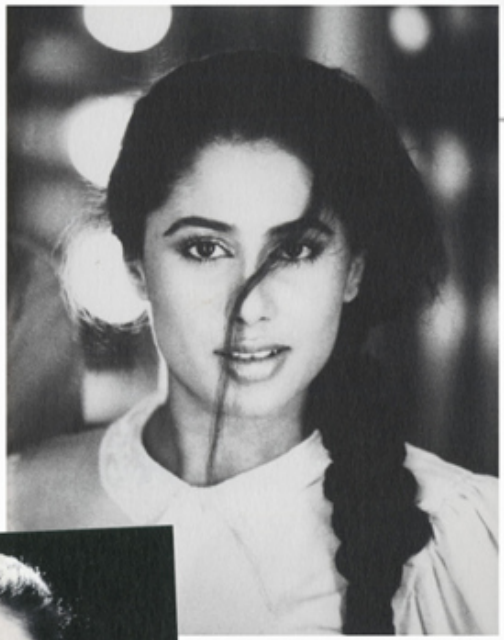
Mirch Masala's Sonbai, poster woman of parallel cinema

Shyam Benegal in Cannes with Shabana and Smita when *Nishant* was in competition

Looking through Shaji Karun's camera during the shoot of *Chidambaram*

Post the making of *Akaler Sandhane* with Mrinal Sen

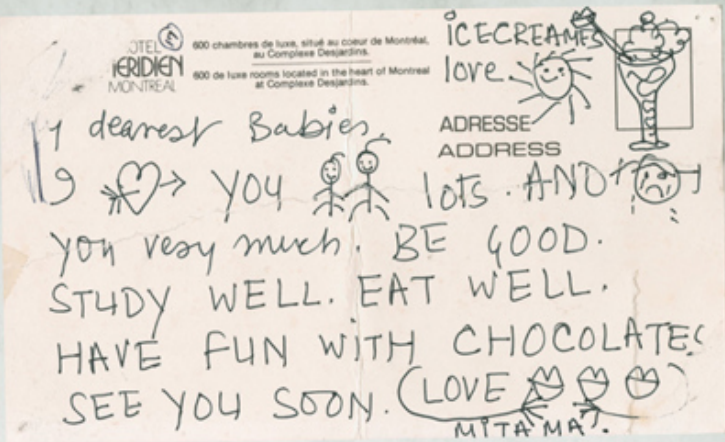
With Shyam Benegal on location for *Mandi*



A natural before the camera

The lonely Khairu of *Gaman*

The thoughtful writer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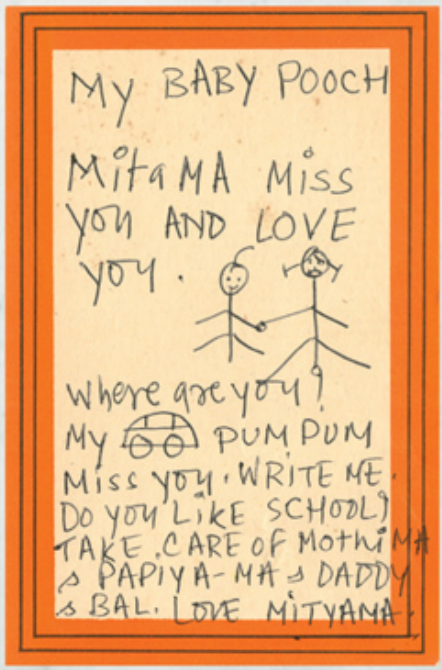
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Postcards to her darling nephews

Images courtesy ANITA PATIL AND SUBHASH CHEDDHA

Celebrating her last birthday with parents Vidya and Shivajirao Patil

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About The Author

MAITHILI RAO is an ex-English lecturer who drifted into film criticism through happenstance. She has written extensively for Indian and international publications. Currently a columnist for *Man's World,* she has written regularly for *The Hindu, Frontline, Cinema In India, FilmComment, International Film Guide,* BFI website, *South Asian Cinema*, *Gentlemen*, *Eve's Weekly* (a long-running monthly column, 'Images of Women'), *The Sunday Observer* and *Independent* (foreign film critic for the last two).

She has served as member of the jury for National Awards and critics' jury at international film festivals (Sochi, MIFF-Mumbai, International children's film festival-Hyderabad, Bengaluru International film festival). She also served as nominations council member of the Asia Pacific Screen Awards, Australia. She has contributed chapters to books on Indian cinema: 'Rebels without a Cause' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica India* volume on Hindi cinema; 'Heart of the Hindi Film' for *Bollywood*, Dakini Publications, London; 'To Be a Woman' for *Frames of Mind*, Indian Council for Cultural Relations; 'Images of Women' for *Rasa*, Vol. II, edited by Chidananda Das Gupta; 'Amitabh Bachchan' for *Icons,* edited by Anil Dharker, Roli; 'Idealized Women and a Realist's Eye' for *Bimal Roy: The ManWho Spoke in Pictures*, edited by Rinki Bhattacharya, essays for *Madhumati* and *Janani* by Rinki Bhattacharya.

She lives in Bombay with a forbearing husband who is not interested in films but calmly survives her deadlines and film mania. An allied activity has been subtitling films from Hindi, Telugu and Kannada into English.

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